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Journey's End

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Journey's End

A PLAY IN THREE ACTS

BY R. C. SHERRIFF

NEW YORK · 1929

Brentano's · Publishers

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JOURNEY'S END was presented by Gilbert Miller for the first time in New York City on March 22, 1929, at the Henry Miller Theatre, with the following cast:

CHARACTERS

Captain Hardy	Evelyn Roberts
Lieut. Osborne	Leon Quartermaine
Private Mason	Victor Stanley
2nd Lieut. Raleigh	Derek Williams
Captain Stanhope	Colin Keith-Johnston
2nd Lieut. Hibbert	Jack Hawkins
Company Sergeant-Major	Sydney Seaward
The Colonel	Eric Stanley
2nd Lieut. Trotter	Henry Wenman
German soldier	Sol Dowday

Directed by James Whale

THE SCENE

A dug-out in the British trenches before St. Quentin.

A few rough steps lead into the trench above, through a low doorway. A table occupies a good space of the dug-out floor. A wooden frame, covered with wire netting, stands against the left wall and serves the double purpose of a bed and a seat for the table. A wooden bench against the back wall makes another seat, and two boxes serve for the other sides.

Another wire-covered bed is fixed in the right corner beyond the doorway.

Gloomy tunnels lead out of the dug-out to left and right.

Except for the table, beds, and seats, there is no furniture save the bottles holding the candles, and a few tattered magazine pictures pinned to the wall of girls in flimsy costumes.

The earth walls deaden the sounds of war, making them faint and far away, although the front line is only fifty yards ahead. The flames of the candles that burn day and night are steady in the still, damp air.

ACT ONE

Evening on Monday, the 18th March, 1918

ACT TWO

SCENE I: *Tuesday morning*

SCENE II: *Tuesday afternoon*

ACT THREE

SCENE I: *Wednesday afternoon*

SCENE II: *Wednesday night*

SCENE III: *Thursday, towards dawn*

Act One

ACT ONE

The evening of a March day. A pale glimmer of moonlight shines down the narrow steps into one corner of the dug-out. Warm yellow candle-flames light the other corner from the necks of two bottles on the table. Through the doorway can be seen the misty grey parapet of a trench and a narrow strip of starlit sky. A bottle of whiskey, a jar of water, and a mug stand on the table amongst a litter of papers and magazines. An officer's equipment hangs in a jumbled mass from a nail in the wall.

CAPTAIN HARDY, *a red-faced, cheerful-looking man is sitting on a box by the table, intently drying a sock over a candle-flame. He wears a heavy trench-boot on his left leg, and his right foot, which is naked, is held above the damp floor by resting it on his left knee. His right boot stands on the floor beside him. As he carefully turns the sock this way and that—feeling it against his face to see if it is dry—he half sings, half hums a song—humming when he is not quite sure of the words, and marking time with the toes of his right foot.*

HARDY

One and Two it's with Maud and Lou;
Three and Four, two girls more;
Five and Six it's with—hm—hm—hm—
Seven, Eight, Clara and Caroline——

[*He lapses into an indefinite humming, and finishes with a lively burst.*]

Tick!—Tock!—wind up the clock,
And we'll start the day over again.

[*A man's legs appear in the moonlit trench above, and a tall, thin man comes slowly down the dug-out steps, stooping low to avoid the roof. He takes his helmet off and reveals a fine head, with close-cropped, iron-grey hair. He looks about forty-five—physically as hard as nails.*]

HARDY

[*Looking round.*] Hullo, Osborne! Your fellows arriving?

OSBORNE

[*Hitching off his pack and dropping it in a corner.*] Yes. They're just coming in.

HARDY

Splendid! Have a drink.

OSBORNE

Thanks. [*He crosses and sits on the left-hand bed.*]

HARDY

[*Passing the whiskey and a mug.*] Don't have too much water. It's rather strong to-day.

OSBORNE

[*Slowly mixing a drink.*] I wonder what it *is* they put in the water.

HARDY

Some sort of disinfectant, I suppose.

OSBORNE

I'd rather have the microbes, wouldn't you?

HARDY

I would—yes——

OSBORNE

Well, cheero.

HARDY

Cheero. Excuse my sock, won't you?

OSBORNE

Certainly. It's a nice-looking sock.

HARDY

It is rather, isn't it? Guaranteed to keep the feet dry. Trouble is, it gets so wet doing it.

OSBORNE

Stanhope asked me to come and take over. He's looking after the men coming in.

HARDY

Splendid! You know, I'm awfully glad you've come.

OSBORNE

I heard it was a quiet bit of line up here.

HARDY

Well, yes—in a *way*. But you never know. Sometimes nothing happens for hours on end; then—all of a sudden—"over she comes!"—rifle grenades—Minnies—and those horrid little things like pineapples—you know.

OSBORNE

I know.

HARDY

Swish—swish—swish—swish—BANG!

OSBORNE

All right—all right—I know.

HARDY

They simply blew us to bits yesterday. Minnies—enormous ones; about twenty. Three bang in the trench. I really *am* glad you've come; I'm not simply being polite.

OSBORNE

Do much damage?

HARDY

Awful. A dug-out got blown up and came down in the men's tea. They were frightfully annoyed.

OSBORNE

I know. There's nothing worse than dirt in your tea.

HARDY

By the way, you know the big German attack's expected any day now?

OSBORNE

It's been expected for the last month.

HARDY

Yes, but it's very near now; there's funny things happening over in the Boche country. I've been out listening at night when it's quiet. There's more transport than usual coming up—you can hear it rattling over the *pavé* all night; more trains in the distance—

puffing up and going away again, one after another, bringing up loads and loads of men——

OSBORNE

Yes. It's coming—pretty soon now.

HARDY

Are you here for six days?

OSBORNE

Yes.

HARDY

Then I should think you'll get it—right in the neck.

OSBORNE

Well, you won't be far away. Come along, let's do this handing over. Where's the map?

HARDY

Here we are. [*He gropes among the papers on the table and finds a tattered map.*] We hold about two hundred yards of front line. We've got a Lewis gun just here—and one here, in this little sap. Sentry posts where the crosses are——

OSBORNE

Where do the men sleep?

HARDY

I don't know. The sergeant-major sees to that. [*He points off to the left.*] The servants and signallers sleep in there. Two officers in here, and three in there. [*He points to the right hand tunnel.*] That is, if you've *got* five officers.

OSBORNE

We've only got four at present, but a new man's coming up to-night. He arrived at transport lines a day or two ago.

HARDY

I hope you get better luck than I did with *my* last officer. He got lumbago the first night and went home. Now he's got a job lecturing young officers on "Life in the Front Line."

OSBORNE

Yes. They do send some funny people over here nowadays. I hope we're lucky and get a youngster straight from school. They're the kind that do best.

HARDY

I suppose they are, really.

OSBORNE

Five beds, you say? [*He examines the one he is sitting on.*] Is this the best one?

HARDY

Oh, no. [*He points to the bed in the right corner.*] *That's* mine. The ones in the other dug-out haven't got any bottoms to them. You keep yourself in by hanging your arms and legs over the sides. Mustn't hang your legs too low, or the rats gnaw your boots.

OSBORNE

You got many rats here?

HARDY

I should say—roughly—about two million; but then, of course, I don't see them all. [*He begins to put on his*

sock and draw on his boot.] Well, there's nothing else you want to know, is there?

OSBORNE

You haven't told me anything yet.

HARDY

What else do you *want* to know?

OSBORNE

Well, what about trench stores?

HARDY

You *are* a fussy old man. Anybody'd think you were in the Army. [*He finds a tattered piece of paper.*] Here you are: 115 rifle grenades—I shouldn't use them if I were you; they upset Jerry and make him offensive. Besides, they are rusty, in any case. Then there's 500 Mills bombs, 34 gum boots——

OSBORNE

That's seventeen pairs——

HARDY

Oh, no; 25 right leg, and 9 left leg. But everything's down here. [*He hands the list to* OSBORNE.]

OSBORNE

Did you check it when you took over?

HARDY

No. I think the sergeant-major did. It's quite all right.

OSBORNE

I expect Stanhope would like to see you before you

go. He always likes a word with the company commander he's relieving.

HARDY

How *is* the dear young boy? Drinking like a fish, as usual?

OSBORNE

Why do you say that?

HARDY

Well, damn it, it's just the natural thing to ask about Stanhope. [*He pauses, and looks curiously at* OSBORNE.] Poor old man. It must be pretty rotten for you, being his second in command, and you such a quiet, sober old thing.

OSBORNE

He's a long way the best company commander we've got.

HARDY

Oh, he's a good chap, I know. But I never *did* see a youngster put away the whiskey he does. D'you know, the last time we were out resting at Valennes he came to supper with us and drank a whole bottle in one hour fourteen minutes—we timed him.

OSBORNE

I suppose it amused everybody; I suppose everybody cheered him on, and said what a splendid achievement it was.

HARDY

He didn't want any "cheering" on——

OSBORNE

No, but everybody thought it was a big thing to do. [*There is a pause.*] Didn't they?

HARDY

Well, you can't help, somehow, *admiring* a fellow who can do that—and then pick out his own hat all by himself and walk home——

OSBORNE

When a boy like Stanhope gets a reputation out here for drinking, he turns into a kind of freak show exhibit. People pay with a bottle of whiskey for the morbid curiosity of seeing him drink it.

HARDY

Well, naturally, you're biased. You have to put him to bed when he gets home.

OSBORNE

It rather reminds you of bear-baiting—or cock-fighting—to sit and watch a boy drink himself unconscious.

HARDY

Well, damn it, it's pretty dull without *something* to liven people up. I mean, after all—Stanhope really *is* a sort of freak; I mean it *is* jolly fascinating to see a fellow drink like he does—glass after glass. He didn't go home on his last leave, did he?

OSBORNE

No.

HARDY

I suppose he didn't think he was fit to meet papa. [*A pause.*] You know his father's vicar of a country village?

OSBORNE

I know.

HARDY

[*Laughing.*] Imagine Stanhope spending his leave in a country vicarage sipping tea! He spent his last leave in Paris, didn't he?

OSBORNE

Yes.

HARDY

I bet it was *some* leave!

OSBORNE

Do you know how long he's been out here?

HARDY

A good time, I know.

OSBORNE

Nearly three years. He came out straight from school —when he was eighteen. He's commanded this company for a year—in and out of the front line. He's never had a rest. Other men come over here and go home again ill, and young Stanhope goes on sticking it, month in, month out.

HARDY

Oh, I know he's a jolly good fellow——

OSBORNE

I've seen him on his back all day with trench fever—then on duty all night——

HARDY

Oh, I know; he's a splendid chap!

OSBORNE

And because he's stuck it till his nerves have got battered to bits, he's called a drunkard.

HARDY

Not a drunkard; just a—just a hard drinker; but you're quite right about his nerves. They *are* all to blazes. Last time out resting we were playing bridge and something happened—I don't remember what it was; some silly little argument—and all of a sudden he jumped up and knocked all the glasses off the table! Lost control of himself; and then he—sort of—came to—and cried——

OSBORNE

Yes, I know.

HARDY

You heard about it?

OSBORNE

He told me.

HARDY

Did he? We tried to hush it up. It just shows the state he's in. [*He rises and puts on his pack. There is a pause.*] You know, Osborne, you ought to be commanding this company.

OSBORNE

Rubbish!

HARDY

Of course you ought. It sticks out a mile. I know he's got pluck and all that, but, damn it, man, you're twice his age—and think what a dear, level-headed old thing you are.

OSBORNE

Don't be an ass. He was out here before I joined up. His experience alone makes him worth a dozen people like me.

HARDY

You know as well as I do, you ought to be in command.

OSBORNE

There isn't a man to touch him as a commander of men. He'll command the battalion one day if——

HARDY

Yes, if! [*He laughs.*]

OSBORNE

You don't know him as I do; I love that fellow. I'd go to hell with him.

HARDY

Oh, you sweet, sentimental old darling!

OSBORNE

Come along. Finish handing over and stop blithering.

HARDY

There's nothing else to do.

OSBORNE

What about the log-book?

HARDY

God! you are a worker. Oh, well. Here we are. [*He finds a tattered little book among the papers on the table.*] Written right up to date; here's my last entry:

"5 p.m. to 8 p.m. All quiet. German airman flew over trenches. Shot a rat."

OSBORNE

Did he?

HARDY

No. I shot the rat, you ass. Well, finish up your whiskey. I want to pack my mug. I'll leave you that drop in the bottle.

OSBORNE

Thanks. [*He drinks up his whiskey and hands* HARDY *the mug.*]

HARDY

[*Tucking the mug into his pack.*] I'll be off.

OSBORNE

Aren't you going to wait and see Stanhope?

HARDY

Well, no, I don't specially want to see him. He's so fussy about the trenches. I expect they *are* rather dirty. He'll talk for hours if he catches me. [*He hitches his pack over his shoulders, hangs on his gas satchel, map-case, binoculars, compass-case, until he looks like a travelling pedlar. As he dresses:*] Well, I hope you have a nice six days. Don't forget to change your clothes if you get wet.

OSBORNE

No, papa.

HARDY

And don't forget about the big attack.

OSBORNE

Oh, Lord, no, I mustn't miss that; I'll make a note in my diary.

HARDY

[*Fully dressed.*] There we are! Do I look every inch a soldier?

OSBORNE

Yes. I should get quite a fright if I were a German and met you coming round a corner.

HARDY

I should bloody well hope you would.

OSBORNE

Shouldn't be able to run away for laughing.

HARDY

Now don't be rude. [*He leans over to light a cigarette from a candle, and looks down on the table.*] Well, I'm damned. Still at it!

OSBORNE

What is?

HARDY

Why, that little cockroach. It's been running round and round that candle since tea-time; must have done a mile.

OSBORNE

I shouldn't hang about here if I were a cockroach.

HARDY

Nor should I. I'd go home. Ever had cockroach races?

OSBORNE

No.

HARDY

Great fun. We've had 'em every evening.

OSBORNE

What are the rules?

HARDY

Oh, you each have a cockroach, and start 'em in a line. On the word "Go" you dig your cockroach in the ribs and steer him with a match across the table. I won ten francs last night—had a *splendid* cockroach. I'll give you a tip.

OSBORNE

Yes?

HARDY

Promise not to let it go any farther?

OSBORNE

Yes.

HARDY

Well, if you want to get the best pace out of a cockroach, dip it in whiskey—makes 'em go like hell!

OSBORNE

Right. Thanks awfully.

HARDY

Well, I must be off. Cheero!

OSBORNE

Cheero!

HARDY

[*Goes up the narrow steps into the trench above, singing softly and happily to himself.*]

"One and Two, it's with Maud and Lou;
Three and Four, two girls more——"

[*The words trail away into the night.*]

[OSBORNE *rises and takes his pack from the floor to the bed by the table. While he undoes it a* SOLDIER SERVANT *comes out of the tunnel from the left with a table-cloth over his arm and a plate with half a loaf of bread on it.*]

MASON

Excuse me, sir. Can I lay supper?

OSBORNE

Yes, do. [*He shuffles up the papers from the table and puts them on the bed.*]

MASON

Thank you, sir. [*He lays the table.*]

OSBORNE

What are you going to tempt us with to-night, Mason?

MASON

Soup, sir—cutlets—and pineapple.

OSBORNE

[*Suspiciously.*] Cutlets?

MASON

Well, sir—well, yes, sir—cutlets.

OSBORNE

What sort of cutlets?

MASON

Now, sir, you've got me. I shouldn't like to commit meself too deep, sir.

OSBORNE

Ordinary ration meat?

MASON

Yes, sir. Ordinary ration meat, but a noo shape, sir. Smells like liver, sir, but it 'asn't got that smooth, wet look that liver's got.

[MASON *leaves the dug-out.*]

[OSBORNE *sits up to the table and examines the map. Voices come from the trench above; a gruff voice says:*] "This is 'C' Company 'Eadquarters, sir."

[*A boyish voice replies.*] "Oh, thanks."

[*There is a pause, then the gruff voice says:*] "Better go down, sir."

[*The boyish voice replies.*] "Yes. Righto."

[An OFFICER *comes groping down the steps and stands in the candle-light. He looks round, a little bewildered. He is a well-built, healthy-looking boy of about eighteen, with the very new uniform of a 2nd lieutenant.* OSBORNE *looks up from the trench map, surprised and interested to see a stranger.*]

OSBORNE

Hullo!

RALEIGH

Good evening [*He notices* OSBORNE'S *grey hair and adds*] sir.

OSBORNE

You the new officer?

RALEIGH

Er—yes. I've been to Battalion Headquarters. They told me to report here.

OSBORNE

Good. We've been expecting you. Sit down, won't you?

RALEIGH

Thanks. [*He sits gingerly on the box opposite* OSBORNE.]

OSBORNE

I should take your pack off.

RALEIGH

Oh, right. [*He slips his pack from his shoulders.*]

OSBORNE

Will you have a drink?

RALEIGH

Er—well——

OSBORNE

You don't drink whiskey?

RALEIGH

[*Hastily.*] Oh, yes—er—just a small one, sir.

OSBORNE

[*Pouring out a small whiskey and adding water.*] Whiskey takes away the taste of the water——

RALEIGH

Oh, yes? [*He pauses, and laughs nervously.*]

OSBORNE

—and the water takes away the taste of the whiskey. [*He hands* RALEIGH *the drink.*] Just out from England?

RALEIGH

Yes, I landed a week ago.

OSBORNE

Boulogne?

RALEIGH

Yes. [*A pause, then he self-consciously holds up his drink.*] Well, here's luck, sir.

OSBORNE

[*Taking a drink himself.*] Good luck. [*He takes out a cigarette case.*] Cigarette?

RALEIGH

Thanks.

OSBORNE

[*Holding a bottle across so that* RALEIGH *can light his cigarette from the candle in it.*] Ever been up in the line before?

RALEIGH

Oh, no. You see, I only left school at the end of last summer term.

OSBORNE

I expect you find it a bit strange.

RALEIGH

[*Laughing.*] Yes—I do—a bit——

OSBORNE

My name's Osborne. I'm second in command of the company. You only call me "sir" in front of the men.

RALEIGH

I see. Thanks.

OSBORNE

You'll find the other officers call me "Uncle."

RALEIGH

Oh, yes? [*He smiles.*]

OSBORNE

What's *your* name?

RALEIGH

Raleigh.

OSBORNE

I knew a Raleigh. A master at Rugby.

RALEIGH

Oh? He may be a relation. I don't know. I've got lots of uncles and—and things like that.

OSBORNE

We've only just moved into these trenches. Captain Stanhope commands the company.

RALEIGH

[*Suddenly brightening up.*] I know. It's a frightful bit of luck.

OSBORNE

Why? D'you know him?

RALEIGH

Yes, rather! We were at school together—at least—of course—I was only a kid and he was one of the big fellows; he's three years older than I am.

[*There is a pause;* OSBORNE *seems to be waiting for* RALEIGH *to go on, then suddenly he says.*]

OSBORNE

He's up in the front line at present, looking after the relief. [*Another pause.*] He's a splendid chap.

RALEIGH

Isn't he? He was skipper of football at Barford, and kept wicket for the eleven. A jolly good bat, too.

OSBORNE

Did you play football—and cricket?

RALEIGH

Oh, yes. Of course, I wasn't in the same class as Dennis—I say, I suppose I ought to call him Captain Stanhope?

OSBORNE

Just "Stanhope."

RALEIGH

I see. Thanks.

OSBORNE

Did you get your colours?

RALEIGH

I did for football. Not cricket.

OSBORNE

Football and cricket seem a long way from here.

RALEIGH

[*Laughing.*] They do, rather.

OSBORNE

We play a bit when we're out of the line.

RALEIGH

Good!

OSBORNE

[*Thoughtfully.*] So you were at school with Stanhope. [*Pause.*] I wonder if he'll remember you? I expect you've grown in the last three years.

RALEIGH

Oh, I think he'll remember me. [*He stops, and goes on rather awkwardly.*] You see, it wasn't only that we were just at school together; our fathers were friends, and Dennis used to come and stay with us in the holidays. Of course, at school I didn't see much of him, but in the holidays we were terrific pals.

OSBORNE

He's a fine company commander.

RALEIGH

I bet he is. Last time he was on leave he came down to the school; he'd just got his M.C. and been made a captain. He looked splendid! It—sort of—made me feel——

OSBORNE

—keen?

RALEIGH

Yes. Keen to get out here. I was frightfully keen to get into Dennis's regiment. I thought, perhaps, with a bit of luck I might get to the same battalion.

OSBORNE

It's a big fluke to have got to the same company.

RALEIGH

I know. It's an amazing bit of luck. When I was at the base I did an awful thing. You see, my uncle's at the base—he has to detail officers to regiments——

OSBORNE

General Raleigh?

RALEIGH

Yes. I went to see him on the quiet and asked him if he could get me into this battalion. He bit my head off, and said I'd got to be treated like everybody else——

OSBORNE

Yes?

RALEIGH

—and next day I was told I *was* coming to this battalion. Funny, wasn't it?

OSBORNE

Extraordinary coincidence!

RALEIGH

And when I got to Battalion Headquarters, and the colonel told me to report to "C" Company, I could have cheered. I expect Dennis'll be frightfully surprised to see me. I've got a message for him.

OSBORNE

From the colonel?

RALEIGH

No. From my sister.

OSBORNE

Your sister?

RALEIGH

Yes. You see, Dennis used to stay with us, and naturally my sister [*he hesitates*]—well—perhaps I ought not——

OSBORNE

That's all right. I didn't actually know that Stanhope——

RALEIGH

They're not—er—officially engaged——

OSBORNE

No?

RALEIGH

She'll be awfully glad I'm with him here; I can write and tell her all about him. He doesn't say much in his letters; can we write often?

OSBORNE

Oh, yes. Letters are collected every day.

[*There is a pause.*]

RALEIGH

You don't think Dennis'll mind my—sort of—forcing myself into his company? I never thought of that; I was so keen.

OSBORNE

No, of course he won't. [*Pause.*] You say it's—it's a good time since you last saw him?

RALEIGH

Let's see. It was in the summer last year—nearly a year ago.

OSBORNE

You know, Raleigh, you mustn't expect to find him —quite the same.

RALEIGH

Oh?

OSBORNE

You see, he's been out here a long time. It—it tells on a man—rather badly.——

RALEIGH

[*Thinking.*] Yes, of course, I suppose it does.

OSBORNE

You may find he's—he's a little bit quick-tempered.

RALEIGH

[*Laughing.*] Oh, I know old Dennis's temper! I remember once at school he caught some chaps in a study with a bottle of whiskey. Lord! the roof nearly blew off. He gave them a dozen each with a cricket stump. [OSBORNE *laughs.*] He was so keen on the fellows in the house keeping fit. He was frightfully down on smoking —and that sort of thing.

OSBORNE

You must remember he's commanded this company

for a long time—through all sorts of rotten times. It's —it's a big strain on a man.

RALEIGH

Oh, it must be.

OSBORNE

If you notice a—difference in Stanhope—you'll know it's only the strain——

RALEIGH

Oh, yes.

[OSBORNE *rouses himself and speaks briskly.*]

OSBORNE

Now, let's see. We've got five beds here—one each. Two in here and three in that dug-out there. I'm afraid you'll have to wait until the others come and pick the beds they want.

RALEIGH

Righto!

OSBORNE

Have you got a blanket?

RALEIGH

Yes, in my pack. [*He rises to get it.*]

OSBORNE

Better wait and unpack when you know where you are sleeping.

RALEIGH

Righto! [*He sits down again.*]

OSBORNE

We never undress when we're in the line. You can

take your boots off now and then in the daytime, but it's better to keep pretty well dressed always.

RALEIGH

I see. Thanks.

OSBORNE

I expect we shall each do about three hours on duty at a time and then six off. We all go on duty at stand-to. That's at dawn and dusk.

RALEIGH

Yes.

OSBORNE

I expect Stanhope'll send you on duty with one of us at first—till you get used to it.

[*There is a pause.* RALEIGH *turns, and looks curiously up the steps into the night.*]

RALEIGH

Are we in the front line here?

OSBORNE

No. That's the support line outside. The front line's about fifty yards farther on.

RALEIGH

How frightfully quiet it is!

OSBORNE

It's often quiet—like this.

RALEIGH

I thought there would be an awful row here—all the time.

OSBORNE

Most people think that.

[*Pause.*]

RALEIGH

I've never known anything so quiet as those trenches we came by; just now and then I heard rifle firing, like the range at Bisley, and a sort of rumble in the distance.

OSBORNE

Those are the guns up north—up Wipers way. The guns are always going up there; it's never quiet like this. [*Pause.*] I expect it's all very strange to you?

RALEIGH

It's—it's not exactly what I thought. It's just this—this quiet that seems so funny.

OSBORNE

A hundred yards from here the Germans are sitting in *their* dug-outs, thinking how quiet it is.

RALEIGH

Are they as near as that?

OSBORNE

About a hundred yards.

RALEIGH

It seems—uncanny. It makes me feel we're—we're all just waiting for something.

OSBORNE

We are, generally, just waiting for something. When anything happens, it happens quickly. Then we just start waiting again.

RALEIGH

I never thought it was like that.

OSBORNE

You thought it was fighting all the time?

RALEIGH

[*Laughing.*] Well, yes, in a way.

OSBORNE

[*After puffing at his pipe in silence for a while.*] Did you come up by trench to-night—or over the top?

RALEIGH

By trench. An amazing trench—turning and twisting for miles, over a sort of plain.

OSBORNE

Lancer's Alley it's called.

RALEIGH

Is it? It's funny the way it begins—in that ruined village, a few steps down into the cellar of a house—then right under the house and through a little garden—and then under the garden wall—then alongside an enormous ruined factory place—then miles and miles of plains, with those green lights bobbing up and down ahead—all along the front as far as you can see.

OSBORNE

Those are the Very lights. Both sides fire them over No Man's Land—to watch for raids and patrols.

RALEIGH

I knew they fired lights. [*Pause.*] I didn't expect so many—and to see them so far away.

OSBORNE

I know. [*He puffs at his pipe.*] There's something rather romantic about it all.

RALEIGH

[*Eagerly.*] Yes, I thought that, too.

OSBORNE

You must always think of it like that if you can. Think of it all as—as romantic. It helps.

[MASON *comes in with more dinner utensils.*]

MASON

D'you expect the captain soon, sir? The soup's 'ot.

OSBORNE

He ought to be here very soon now. This is Mr. Raleigh, Mason.

MASON

Good evening, sir.

RALEIGH

Good evening.

MASON

[*To* OSBORNE.] I've 'ad rather a unpleasant surprise, sir.

OSBORNE

What's happened?

MASON

You know that tin o' pineapple chunks I got, sir?

OSBORNE

Yes?

MASON

Well, sir, I'm sorry to say it's apricots.

OSBORNE

Good heavens! It must have given you a turn.

MASON

I distinctly said "pineapple chunks" at the canteen.

OSBORNE

Wasn't there a label on the tin?

MASON

No, sir. I pointed that out to the men. I said was 'e *certain* it was pineapple chunks?

OSBORNE

I suppose he said he was.

MASON

Yes, sir. 'E said a leopard can't change its spots, sir.

OSBORNE

What have leopards got to do with pineapple?

MASON

That's just what *I* thought, sir. Made me *think* there was something fishy about it. You see, sir, I know the captain can't stand the sight of apricots. 'E said next time we 'ad them 'e'd wring my neck.

OSBORNE

Haven't you anything else?

MASON

There's a pink blancmange I've made, sir. But it ain't anywhere near stiff yet.

OSBORNE

Never mind. We must have the apricots and chance it.

MASON

Only I thought I'd tell you, sir, so as the captain wouldn't blame me.

OSBORNE

All right, Mason. [*Voices are heard in the trench above.*] That sounds like the captain coming now.

MASON

[*Hastening away.*] I'll go and dish out the soup, sir.

[*The voices grow nearer; two figures appear in the trench above and grope down the steps—the leading figure tall and thin, the other short and fat. The tall figure is* CAPTAIN STANHOPE. *At the bottom of the steps he straightens himself, pulls off his pack, and drops it on the floor. Then he takes off his helmet and throws it on the right-hand bed. Despite his stars of rank he is no more than a boy; tall, slimly built, but broad-shouldered. His dark hair is carefully brushed; his uniform, though old and war-stained, is well cut and cared for. He is good-looking, rather from attractive features than the healthy good looks of* RALEIGH. *Although tanned by months in the open air, there is a pallor under his skin and dark shadows under his eyes. His short and fat companion—*2ND LIEUTENANT TROTTER—*is middle-aged and homely looking. His face is red, fat, and round; apparently he has put on weight during his war service, for his tunic appears to be on the verge of bursting at the waist. He carries an extra pack belonging to the officer left on duty in the line.*]

STANHOPE

[*As he takes off his pack, gas satchel, and belt.*] Has Hardy gone?

OSBORNE

Yes. He cleared off a few minutes ago.

STANHOPE

Lucky for him he did. I had a few words to say to Master Hardy. You never saw the blasted mess those fellows left the trenches in. Dug-outs smell like cess-pits; rusty bombs; damp rifle grenades; it's perfectly foul. Where are the servants?

OSBORNE

In there.

STANHOPE

[*Calling into* MASON'S *dug-out.*] Hi! Mason!

MASON

[*Outside.*] Coming, sir! Just bringing the soup, sir.

STANHOPE

[*Taking a cigarette from his case and lighting it.*] Damn the soup! Bring some whiskey!

OSBORNE

Here's a new officer, Stanhope—just arrived.

STANHOPE

Oh, sorry. [*He turns and peers into the dim corner where* RALEIGH *stands smiling awkwardly.*] I didn't see you in this miserable light. [*He stops short at the sight of* RALEIGH. *There is silence.*]

RALEIGH

Hullo, Stanhope!

[STANHOPE *stares at* RALEIGH *as though dazed.* RALEIGH *takes a step forward, half raises his hand, then lets it drop to his side.*]

STANHOPE

[*In a low voice.*] How did you—get here?

RALEIGH

I was told to report to your company, Stanhope.

STANHOPE

Oh. I see. Rather a coincidence.

RALEIGH

[*With a nervous laugh.*] Yes.

[*There is a silence for a moment, broken by* OSBORNE *in a matter-of-fact voice.*]

OSBORNE

I say, Stanhope, it's a terrible business. We thought we'd got a tin of pineapple chunks; it turns out to be apricots.

TROTTER

Ha! Give me apricots every time! I 'ate pineapple chunks; too bloomin' sickly for me!

RALEIGH

I'm awfully glad I got to your company, Stanhope.

STANHOPE

When did you get here?

RALEIGH

Well, I've only just come.

OSBORNE

He came up with the transport while you were taking over.

STANHOPE

I see.

[MASON *brings in a bottle of whiskey, a mug, and two plates of soup—so precariously that* OSBORNE *has to help with the soup plates on to the table.*]

STANHOPE

[*With sudden forced gaiety.*] Come along, Uncle! Come and sit here. [*He waves towards the box on the right of the table.*] You better sit there, Raleigh.

RALEIGH

Right!

TROTTER

[*Taking a pair of pince-nez from his tunic pocket, putting them on, and looking curiously at* RALEIGH.] You Raleigh?

RALEIGH

Yes.

[*Pause.*]

TROTTER

I'm Trotter.

RALEIGH

Oh, yes?

[*Pause.*]

TROTTER

How *are* you?

RALEIGH

Oh, all right, thanks.

TROTTER

Been out 'ere before?

RALEIGH

No.

TROTTER

Feel a bit odd, I s'pose?

RALEIGH

Yes. A bit.

TROTTER

[*Getting a box to sit on.*] Oh, well, you'll soon get used to it; you'll feel you've been 'ere a year in about an hour's time. [*He puts the box on its side and sits on it. It is too low for the table, and he puts it on its end. It is then too high. He tries the other side, which is too low; he finally contrives to make himself comfortable by sitting on his pack, placed on the side of the box.*]

[MASON *arrives with two more plates of soup.*]

OSBORNE

What kind of soup is this, Mason?

MASON

It's yellow soup, sir.

OSBORNE

It's got a very deep yellow flavour.

TROTTER

[*Taking a melodious sip.*] It wants some pepper; bring some pepper, Mason.

MASON

[*Anxiously.*] I'm very sorry, sir. When the mess box was packed the pepper was omitted, sir.

TROTTER

[*Throwing his spoon with a clatter into the plate.*] Oh, I say, but damn it!

OSBORNE

We must have pepper. It's a disinfectant.

TROTTER

You must have pepper in soup!

STANHOPE

[*Quietly.*] Why wasn't it packed, Mason?

MASON

It—it was missed, sir.

STANHOPE

Why?

MASON

[*Miserably.*] Well, sir, I left it to——

STANHOPE

Then I advise you never to leave it to anyone else again—unless you want to rejoin your platoon out there. [*He points into the moonlit trench.*]

MASON

I'm—I'm very sorry, sir.

STANHOPE

Send one of the signallers.

MASON

Yes, sir. [*He hastens to the tunnel entrance and calls.*] Bert, you're wanted!

[*A* SOLDIER *appears, with a rifle slung over his shoulder. He stands stiffly to attention.*]

STANHOPE

Do you know "A" Company Headquarters?

SOLDIER

Yes, sir.

STANHOPE

Go there at once and ask Captain Willis, with my compliments, if he can lend me a little pepper.

SOLDIER

Very good, sir.

[*He turns smartly and goes up the steps,* MASON *stopping him for a moment to say confidentially:* "A *screw* of pepper, you ask for."]

OSBORNE

We must have pepper.

TROTTER

I mean—after all—war's bad enough with pepper —[*noisy sip*]—but war without pepper—it's—it's bloody awful!

OSBORNE

What's it like outside?

TROTTER

Quiet as an empty 'ouse. There's a nasty noise going on up north.

OSBORNE

Wipers, I expect. I believe there's trouble up there. I wish we knew more of what's going on.

TROTTER

So do I. Still, my wife reads the papers every morning and writes and tells me.

OSBORNE

Hardy says they had a lively time here yesterday. Three big Minnies right in the trench.

TROTTER

I know. And they left the bloomin' 'oles for us to fill in. [MASON *arrives with cutlets on enamel plates.*] What's this?

MASON

Meat, sir.

TROTTER

I know that. What sort?

MASON

Sort of cutlet, sir.

TROTTER

Sort of cutlet, is it? You know, Mason, there's cutlets and cutlets.

MASON

I know, sir; that one's a cutlet.

TROTTER

Well, it won't let me cut it.

MASON

No, sir?

TROTTER

That's a joke.

MASON

Oh. Right, sir. [*He goes out.*]

OSBORNE

[*Studying the map.*] There's a sort of ruin marked on this map—just in front of here, in No Man's Land—called Beauvais Farm.

TROTTER

That's what we saw sticking up, skipper. I wondered what it was.

STANHOPE

Better go out and look at it to-night.

TROTTER

I 'ate ruins in No Man's Land; too bloomin' creepy for me.

OSBORNE

There's only about sixty yards of No Man's Land, according to this map—narrower on the left, from the head of this sap; only about fifty.

TROTTER

[*Who has been looking curiously at* STANHOPE, *eating his meal with lowered head.*] Cheer up, skipper. You *do* look glum!

STANHOPE

I'm tired.

OSBORNE

I should turn in and get some sleep after supper.

STANHOPE

I've got hours of work before I sleep.

OSBORNE

I'll do the duty roll and see the sergeant-major—and all that.

STANHOPE

That's all right, Uncle. I'll see to it. [*He turns to* RALEIGH *for the first time.*] Trotter goes on duty directly he's had supper. You better go on with him—to learn.

RALEIGH

Oh, right.

TROTTER

Look 'ere, skipper, it's nearly eight now; couldn't we make it 'alf-past?

STANHOPE

No. I told Hibbert he'd be relieved at eight. Will you take from eleven till two, Uncle?

OSBORNE

Right.

STANHOPE

Hibbert can do from two till four, and I'll go on from then till stand-to. That'll be at six.

TROTTER

Well, boys! 'Ere we are for six days again. Six bloomin' eternal days. [*He makes a calculation on the table.*] That's a hundred and forty-four hours; eight

thousand six 'undred and forty minutes. *That* doesn't sound so bad; we've done twenty of 'em already. I've got an idea! I'm going to draw a hundred and forty-four little circles on a bit o' paper, and every hour I'm going to black one in; that'll make the time go all right.

STANHOPE

It's five to eight now. You better go and relieve Hibbert. Then you can come back at eleven o'clock and black in three of your bloody little circles.

TROTTER

I 'aven't 'ad my apricots yet!

STANHOPE

We'll keep your apricots till you come back.

TROTTER

I never knew anything like a war for upsetting meals. I'm always down for dooty in the middle of one.

STANHOPE

That's because you never stop eating.

TROTTER

Any'ow, let's 'ave some coffee. Hi! Mason! Coffee!

MASON

Coming, sir!

TROTTER

[*Getting up.*] Well, I'll get dressed. Come on, Raleigh.

RALEIGH

[*Rising quickly.*] Right!

TROTTER

Just wear your belt with revolver case on it. Must have your revolver to shoot rats. And your gas mask—come here—I'll show you. [*He helps* RALEIGH.] You wear it sort of tucked up under your chin like a serviette.

RALEIGH

Yes. I was shown the way at home.

TROTTER

Now your hat. That's right. You don't want a walking-stick. It gets in your way if you have to run fast.

RALEIGH

Why—er—do you have to run fast?

TROTTER

Oh, Lord, yes, often! If you see a Minnie coming—that's a big trench-mortar shell, you know—short for *Minnywerfer*—you see 'em coming right out of the Boche trenches, right up in the air, then down, down, down; and you have to judge it and run like stink sometimes.

[MASON *comes in with two cups of coffee.*]

MASON

Coffee, sir?

TROTTER

Thanks. [*He takes the cup and drinks standing up.*]

RALEIGH

Thanks.

TROTTER

You might leave my apricots out, Mason. Put 'em on

a separate plate and keep 'em in there. [*He points to* MASON'S *dug-out.*]

MASON

Very good, sir.

TROTTER

If you bring 'em in 'ere you never know *what* might 'appen to 'em.

MASON

No, sir.

TROTTER

"B" Company on our right, aren't they, skipper?

STANHOPE

Yes. There's fifty yards of undefended area between. You better patrol that a good deal.

TROTTER

Aye, aye, sir.

STANHOPE

Have a look at that Lewis gun position on the left. See what field of fire they've got.

TROTTER

Aye, aye, sir. You don't want me to go out and look at that blinkin' ruin?

STANHOPE

I'll see to that.

TROTTER

Good. I don't fancy crawling about on my belly after that cutlet. [*To* RALEIGH.] Well, come on, my lad, let's go and see about this 'ere war.

[*The two go up the steps, leaving* STANHOPE *and* OSBORNE *alone.* MASON *appears at his dug-out door.*]

MASON

Will you take apricots, sir?

STANHOPE

No, thanks.

MASON

Mr. Osborne?

OSBORNE

No, thanks.

MASON

I'm sorry about them being apricots, sir. I explained to Mr. Osborne——

STANHOPE

[*Curtly.*] That's all right, Mason—thank you.

MASON

Very good, sir. [*He goes out.*]

OSBORNE

[*Over by the right-hand bed.*] Will you sleep here? This was Hardy's bed.

STANHOPE

No. You sleep there. I'd rather sleep by the table here. I can get up and work without disturbing you.

OSBORNE

This is a better one.

STANHOPE

You take it. Must have a little comfort in your old age, Uncle.

OSBORNE

I wish you'd turn in and sleep for a bit.

STANHOPE

Sleep?—I can't sleep. [*He takes a whiskey and water. A man appears in the trench and comes down the steps—a small, slightly built man in the early twenties, with a little moustache and a pallid face.*]

STANHOPE

[*Looking hard at the newcomer.*] Well, Hibbert?

HIBBERT

Everything's fairly quiet. Bit of sniping somewhere to our left; some rifle grenades coming over just on our right.

STANHOPE

I see. Mason's got your supper.

HIBBERT

[*Gently rubbing his forehead.*] I don't think I can manage any supper to-night, Stanhope. It's this beastly neuralgia. It seems to be right inside this eye. The beastly pain gets worse every day.

STANHOPE

Some hot soup and a good tough chop'll put that right.

HIBBERT

I'm afraid the pain rather takes my appetite away. I'm damn sorry to keep on talking about it, Stanhope, only I thought you'd wonder why I don't eat anything much.

STANHOPE

Try and forget about it.

HIBBERT

[*With a little laugh.*] Well—I wish I could.

STANHOPE

Get tight.

HIBBERT

I think I'll turn straight in for a rest—and try and get some sleep.

STANHOPE

All right. Turn in. You're in that dug-out there. Here's your pack. [*He picks up the pack that* TROTTER *brought down.*] You go on duty at two. I take over from you at four. I'll tell Mason to call you.

HIBBERT

[*Faintly.*] Oh, right—thanks, Stanhope—cheero.

STANHOPE

Cheero. [*He watches* HIBBERT *go down the tunnel into the dark.*]

HIBBERT

[*Returning.*] Can I have a candle?

STANHOPE

[*Taking one from the table.*] Here you are.

HIBBERT

Thanks.

[*He goes out again. There is silence.* STANHOPE *turns to* OSBORNE.]

STANHOPE

Another little worm trying to wriggle home.

OSBORNE

[*Filling his pipe.*] I wonder if he really is bad. He looks rotten.

STANHOPE

Pure bloody funk, that's all. He could eat if he wanted to; he's starving himself purposely. Artful little swine! Neuralgia's a splendid idea. No proof, as far as I can see.

OSBORNE

You can't help feeling sorry for him. I think he's tried hard.

STANHOPE

How long's he been out here? Three months, I suppose. Now he's decided he's done his bit. He's decided to go home and spend the rest of the war in comfortable nerve hospitals. Well, he's mistaken. I let Warren get away like that, but no more.

OSBORNE

I don't see how you can prevent a fellow going sick.

STANHOPE

I'll have a quiet word with the doctor before *he* does. He thinks he's going to wriggle off before the attack. We'll just see about that. No man of mine's going sick before the attack. They're going to take an equal chance —together.

OSBORNE

Raleigh looks a nice chap.

STANHOPE

[*Looking hard at* OSBORNE *before replying.*] Yes.

OSBORNE

Good-looking youngster. At school with you, wasn't he?

STANHOPE

Has he been talking already?

OSBORNE

He just mentioned it. It was a natural thing to tell me when he knew you were in command. [STANHOPE *is lounging at the table with his back to the wall.* OSBORNE, *sitting on the right-hand bed, begins to puff clouds of smoke into the air as he lights his pipe.*] He's awfully pleased to get into your company. [STANHOPE *makes no reply. He picks up a pencil and scribbles on the back of a magazine.*] He seems to think a lot of you.

STANHOPE

[*Looking up quickly at* OSBORNE *and laughing.*] Yes, I'm his hero.

OSBORNE

It's quite natural.

STANHOPE

You think so?

OSBORNE

Small boys at school generally have their heroes.

STANHOPE

Yes. Small boys at school do.

OSBORNE

Often it goes on as long as——

STANHOPE

—as long as the hero's a hero.

OSBORNE

It often goes on all through life.

STANHOPE

I wonder. How many battalions are there in France?

OSBORNE

Why?

STANHOPE

We'll say fifty divisions. That's a hundred and fifty brigades—four hundred and fifty battalions. That's one thousand eight hundred companies. [*He looks up at* OSBORNE *from his calculations on the magazine cover.*] There are one thousand eight hundred companies in France, Uncle. Raleigh might have been sent to any one of those, and, my God! he comes to mine.

OSBORNE

You ought to be glad. He's a good-looking youngster. I like him.

STANHOPE

I knew you'd like him. Personality, isn't it? [*He takes a worn leather case from his breast pocket and hands a small photograph to* OSBORNE.] I've never shown you that, have I?

OSBORNE

[*Looking at the photograph.*] No. [*Pause.*] Raleigh's sister, isn't it?

STANHOPE

How did you know?

OSBORNE

There's a strong likeness.

STANHOPE

I suppose there is.

OSBORNE

[*Intent on the picture.*] She's an awfully nice-looking girl.

STANHOPE

A photo doesn't show much, really. Just a face.

OSBORNE

She looks awfully nice. [*There is silence.* STANHOPE *lights a cigarette.* OSBORNE *hands the photo back.*] You're a lucky chap.

STANHOPE

[*Putting the photo back into his case.*] I don't know why I keep it, really.

OSBORNE

Why? Isn't she—I thought——

STANHOPE

What did you think?

OSBORNE

Well, I thought that perhaps she was waiting for you.

STANHOPE

Yes. She is waiting for me—and she doesn't know. She thinks I'm a wonderful chap—commanding a company. [*He turns to* OSBORNE *and points up the steps into the line.*] She doesn't know that if I went up those

steps into the front line—without being doped with whiskey—I'd go mad with fright.

[*There is a pause.* OSBORNE *stirs himself to speak.*]

OSBORNE

Look here, old man. I've meant to say it, for a long time, but it sounds damned impudence. You've done longer out here than any man in the battalion. It's time you went away for a rest. It's due to you.

STANHOPE

You suggest that I go sick, like that little worm in there—neuralgia in the eye? [*He laughs and takes a drink.*]

OSBORNE

No. Not that. The colonel would have sent you down long ago, only——

STANHOPE

Only—what?

OSBORNE

Only he can't spare you.

STANHOPE

[*Laughing.*] Oh, rot!

OSBORNE

He told me.

STANHOPE

He thinks I'm in such a state I want a rest, is that it?

OSBORNE

No. He thinks it's due to you.

STANHOPE

It's all right, Uncle. I'll stick it out now. It may not be much longer now. I've had my share of luck—more than my share. There's not a man left who was here when I came. But it's rather damnable for that boy—of all the boys in the world—to have come to *me*. I might at least have been spared that.

OSBORNE

You're looking at things in rather a black sort of way.

STANHOPE

I've just told you. That boy's a hero-worshipper. I'm three years older than he is. You know what that means at school. I was skipper of football and all that sort of thing. It doesn't sound much to a man out here—but it does at school with a kid of fourteen. Damn it, Uncle, you're a schoolmaster; you know.

OSBORNE

I've just told you what I think of hero-worship.

STANHOPE

Raleigh's father knew mine, and I was told to keep an eye on the kid. I rather liked the idea of looking after him. I made him keen on the right things—and all that. His people asked me to stay with them one summer. I met his sister then——

OSBORNE

Yes?

STANHOPE

At first I thought of her as another kid like Raleigh. It was just before I came out here for the first time that

I realised what a topping girl she was. Funny how you realise it suddenly. I just prayed to come through the war—and—and *do* things—and keep absolutely fit for her.

OSBORNE

You've done pretty well. An M.C. and a company.

STANHOPE

[*Taking another whiskey.*] It was all right at first. When I went home on leave after six months it was jolly fine to feel I'd done a little to make her pleased. [*He takes a gulp of his drink.*] It was after I came back here —in that awful affair on Vimy Ridge. I knew I'd go mad if I didn't break the strain. I couldn't bear being fully conscious all the time—*you've* felt that, Uncle, haven't you?

OSBORNE

Yes, often.

STANHOPE

There were only two ways of breaking the strain. One was pretending I was ill—and going home; the other was this. [*He holds up his glass.*] Which would you pick, Uncle?

OSBORNE

I haven't been through as much as you. I don't know yet.

STANHOPE

I thought it all out. It's a slimy thing to go home if you're not really ill, isn't it?

OSBORNE

I think it is.

STANHOPE

Well, then. [*He holds his glass up to* OSBORNE.] Cheero, and long live the men who go home with neuralgia. [*He puts his glass down.*] I didn't go home on my last leave. I couldn't bear to meet her, in case she realised——

OSBORNE

When the war's over—and the strain's gone—you'll soon be as fit as ever, at your age.

STANHOPE

I've hoped that all the time. I'd go away for months and live in the open air—and get fit—and then go back to her.

OSBORNE

And so you can.

STANHOPE

If Raleigh had gone to one of those other one thousand eight hundred companies.

OSBORNE

I don't see why you should think——

STANHOPE

Oh, for Lord's sake don't be a damn fool. *You* know! You know he'll write and tell her I reek of whiskey all day.

OSBORNE

Why should he? He's not a——

STANHOPE

Exactly. He's not a damned little swine who'd deceive his sister.

OSBORNE

He's very young; he's got hundreds of strange things to learn; he'll realise that men are—*different*—out here.

STANHOPE

It's no good, Uncle. Didn't you see him sitting there at supper?—staring at me?—and wondering? He's up in those trenches now—still wondering—and beginning to understand. And all these months he's wanted to be with me out here. Poor little devil!

OSBORNE

I believe Raleigh'll go on liking you—and looking up to you—through everything. There's something very deep, and rather fine, about hero-worship.

STANHOPE

Hero-worship be damned! [*He pauses, then goes on, in a strange, high-pitched voice.*] You know, Uncle, I'm an *awful* fool. I'm *captain* of this company. What's that bloody little prig of a boy matter? D'you see? He's a little prig. Wants to write home and tell Madge all about *me*. Well, he won't; d'you see, Uncle? He *won't* write. Censorship! I censor his letters—cross out all he says about me.

OSBORNE

You can't read his letters.

STANHOPE

[*Dreamily.*] Cross out all he says about me. Then we all go west in the big attack—and she goes on thinking I'm a fine fellow for ever—and ever—and ever. [*He pours out a drink, murmuring "Ever—and ever—and ever."*]

OSBORNE

[*Rising from his bed.*] It's not as bad as all that. Turn in and have a sleep.

STANHOPE

Sleep! Catch *me* wasting my time with sleep.

OSBORNE

[*Picking up* STANHOPE'S *pack and pulling out the blanket.*] Come along, old chap. You come and lie down here. [*He puts the pack as a pillow on* STANHOPE'S *bed, and spreads out the blanket.*]

STANHOPE

[*With his chin in his hands.*] Little prig—that's what he is. Did *I* ask him to force his way into my company? No! I didn't. Very well, he'll pay for his damn cheek. [OSBORNE *lays his hand gently on* STANHOPE'S *shoulder to persuade him to lie down.*] Go away! [*He shakes* OSBORNE'S *hand off.*] What the hell are you trying to do?

OSBORNE

Come and lie down and go to sleep.

STANHOPE

Go sleep y'self. I censor his letters, d'you see, Uncle? You watch and see he doesn't smuggle any letters away.

OSBORNE

Righto. Now come and lie down. You've had a hard day of it.

STANHOPE

[*Looking up suddenly.*] Where's Hardy? D'you say he's gone?

OSBORNE

Yes. He's gone.

STANHOPE

Gone, has he? Y'know, I had a word to say to Master Hardy. He *would* go, the swine! Dirty trenches—everything dirty—I wanner tell him to keep his trenches clean.

OSBORNE

[*Standing beside* STANHOPE *and putting his hand gently on his shoulder again.*] We'll clean them up tomorrow.

[STANHOPE *looks up at* OSBORNE *and laughs gaily.*]

STANHOPE

Dear old Uncle! Clean trenches up—with little dustpan and brush. [*He laughs.*] Make you little apron—with lace on it.

OSBORNE

That'll be fine. Now then, come along, old chap. I'll see you get called at two o'clock. [*He firmly takes* STANHOPE *by the arm and draws him over to the bed.*] You *must* be tired.

STANHOPE

[*In a dull voice.*] God, I'm bloody tired; ache—all over—feel sick—

[OSBORNE *helps him on to the bed, takes the blanket and puts it over him.*]

OSBORNE

You'll feel all right in a minute. How's that? Comfortable?

STANHOPE

Yes. Comfortable. [*He looks up into* OSBORNE's *face and laughs again.*] Dear old Uncle. Tuck me up.

[OSBORNE *fumbles the blankets round* STANHOPE.]

OSBORNE

There we are.

STANHOPE

Kiss me, Uncle.

OSBORNE

Kiss you be blowed! You go to sleep.

STANHOPE

[*Closing his eyes.*] Yes—I go sleep. [*He turns slowly on to his side with his face to the earth wall.*]

[OSBORNE *stands watching for a while, then blows out the candle by* STANHOPE'S *bed.* STANHOPE *gives a deep sigh, and begins to breathe heavily.* OSBORNE *crosses to the servant's dug-out and calls softly.*]

OSBORNE

Mason!

MASON

[*Appearing with unbuttoned tunic at the tunnel entrance.*] Yessir?

OSBORNE

Will you call me at ten minutes to eleven—and Mr. Hibbert at ten minutes to two? I'm going to turn in for a little while.

MASON

Very good, sir. [*Pause.*] The pepper's come, sir.

OSBORNE

Oh, good.

MASON

I'm very sorry about the pepper, sir.

OSBORNE

That's all right, Mason.

MASON

Good night, sir.

OSBORNE

Good night.

[MASON *leaves the dugout.* OSBORNE *turns, and looks up the narrow steps into the night, where the Very lights rise and fade against the starlit sky. He glances once more at* STANHOPE, *then crosses to his own bed, takes out from his tunic pocket a large, old-fashioned watch, and quietly winds it up. Through the stillness comes the low rumble of distant guns.*]

THE CURTAIN FALLS

Act Two

ACT TWO

SCENE I

Early next morning.

A pale shaft of sunlight shines down the steps, but candles still burn in the dark corner where OSBORNE *and* RALEIGH *are at breakfast.* MASON *has put a large plate of bacon before each, and turns to go as* TROTTER *comes down the steps, whistling gaily and rubbing his hands.*

TROTTER

What a lovely smell of bacon!

MASON

Yes, sir. I reckon there's enough smell of bacon in 'ere to last for dinner.

TROTTER

Well, there's nothing like a good fat bacon rasher when you're as empty as I am.

MASON

I'm glad you like it fat, sir.

TROTTER

Well, I like a bit o' lean, too.

MASON

There *was* a bit of lean in the middle of yours, sir, but it's kind of shrunk up in the cooking.

TROTTER
Bad cooking, that's all. Any porridge?

MASON
Oh, yes, sir. There's porridge.

TROTTER
Lumpy, I s'pose?

MASON
Yes, sir. Quite nice and lumpy.

TROTTER
Well, take the lumps out o' mine.

MASON
And just bring you the gravy, sir? Very good, sir.

[MASON *goes out.* TROTTER *looks after him suspiciously.*]

TROTTER
You know, that man's getting familiar.

OSBORNE
He's not a bad cook.

[TROTTER *has picked up his coffee mug, and is smelling it.*]

TROTTER
I say, d'you realise he's washed his dish-cloth?

OSBORNE
I know. I told him about it.

TROTTER
Did you really? You've got some pluck. 'Ow did you go about it?

OSBORNE

I wrote and asked my wife for a packet of Lux. Then I gave it to Mason and suggested he try it on something.

TROTTER

Good man. No, he's not a bad cook. Might be a lot worse. When I was in the ranks we 'ad a prize cook—used to be a plumber before the war. Ought to 'ave seen the stew 'e made. Thin! Thin wasn't the word. Put a bucketful of 'is stew in a bath and pull the plug, and the whole lot would go down in a couple of gurgles.

[MASON *brings* TROTTER'S *porridge.*]

MASON

I've took the lumps out.

TROTTER

Good. Keep 'em and use 'em for dumplings next time we 'ave boiled beef.

MASON

Very good, sir. [*He goes out.*]

TROTTER

Yes. That plumber was a prize cook, 'e was. Lucky for us one day 'e set 'imself on fire making the tea. 'E went 'ome pretty well fried. Did Mason get that pepper?

OSBORNE

Yes.

TROTTER

Good. Must 'ave pepper.

OSBORNE

I thought you were on duty now.

TROTTER

I'm supposed to be. Stanhope sent me down to get my breakfast. He's looking after things till I finish.

OSBORNE

He's got a long job then.

TROTTER

Oh, no. I'm a quick eater. Hi! Mason! Bacon!

MASON

[*Outside.*] Coming, sir!

OSBORNE

It's a wonderful morning.

TROTTER

Isn't it lovely? Makes you feel sort of young and 'opeful. I was up in that old trench under the brick wall just now, and damned if a bloomin' little bird didn't start singing! Didn't 'arf sound funny. Sign of spring, I s'pose. [MASON *arrives with* TROTTER'S *bacon.*] That looks all right.

MASON

If you look down straight on it from above, sir, you can see the bit o' lean quite clear.

TROTTER

Good Lord, yes! That's it, isn't it?

MASON

No, sir; that's a bit o' rust off the pan.

TROTTER

Ah! *That's* it, then!

MASON

You've got it, sir. [*He goes out.*]

TROTTER

Cut us a chunk of bread, Uncle.

[OSBORNE *cuts him off a chunk.*]

OSBORNE

How are things going up there?

TROTTER

I don't like the look of things a bit.

OSBORNE

You mean—the quiet?

TROTTER

Yes. Standing up there in the dark last night there didn't seem a thing in the world alive—except the rats squeaking and my stomach grumbling about that cutlet.

OSBORNE

It's quiet even now.

TROTTER

Too damn quiet. You can bet your boots the Boche is up to something. The big attack soon, I reckon. I don't like it, Uncle. Pass the jam.

OSBORNE

It's strawberry.

TROTTER

Is it? I'm glad we've got rid o' that raspberry jam. Can't stand raspberry jam. Pips get be'ind your plate.

OSBORNE

Did Stanhope tell you he wants two wiring parties out to-night?

TROTTER

Yes. He's fixing it up now. [*He pauses, and goes on in a low voice.*] My goodness, Uncle, doesn't he look ill!

OSBORNE

I'm afraid he's not well.

TROTTER

Nobody'd be well who went on like he does. [*There is another pause.*] You know when you came up to relieve me last night?

OSBORNE

Yes?

TROTTER

Well, Raleigh and me came back here, and there was Stanhope sitting on that bed drinking a whiskey. He looked as white as a sheet. God, he looked awful; he'd drunk the bottle since dinner. I said, "'Ullo!" and he didn't seem to know who I was. Uncanny wasn't it, Raleigh?

RALEIGH

[*With lowered head.*] Yes.

TROTTER

He just said, "Better go to bed, Raleigh"—just as if Raleigh'd been a school kid.

OSBORNE

Did he? [*There is a pause.*] Look at the sun. It'll be quite warm soon.

[*They look at the pale square of sunlight on the floor.*]

TROTTER

It's warm now. You can feel it on your face outside if you stand in it. First time this year. 'Ope we 'ave an 'ot summer.

OSBORNE

So do I.

TROTTER

Funny about that bird. Made me feel quite braced up. Sort of made me think about my garden of an evening—walking round in me slippers after supper, smoking me pipe.

OSBORNE

You keen on gardening?

TROTTER

Oh, I used to do a bit of an evening. I 'ad a decent little grass plot in front, with flower-borders—geraniums, lobelia, and calsularia—you know, red, white, and blue. Looked rather nice in the summer.

OSBORNE

Yes.

TROTTER

'Ad some fine 'olly'ocks out the back. One year I 'ad one eight feet 'igh. Took a photer of it. [*He fumbles in his pocket case.*] Like to look at it?

OSBORNE

I would. [*He looks at the photo.*] By Jove, it's a beauty.

TROTTER

[*Looking over* OSBORNE'S *shoulder.*] You see that, just there?

OSBORNE

Yes?

TROTTER

That's the roof of the summer-'ouse.

OSBORNE

Is it really!

TROTTER

Just shows the 'ite of the 'olly'ock.

OSBORNE

It does. [*He shows the photo to* RALEIGH.] A beauty, isn't it?

RALEIGH

Rather!

TROTTER

It never wanted no stick to keep it straight, neether. [*There is a pause.*] You keen on gardening?

OSBORNE

Yes. A bit. I made a rockery when I was home on leave. I used to cycle out to the woods and get primroses and things like that, and try and get 'em to grow in my garden.

TROTTER

I don't suppose they would!

OSBORNE

They would if you pressed a bit of moss round them——

TROTTER

—to make 'em feel at 'ome, eh? [*He laughs.*]

OSBORNE

They'll be coming out again soon if they've got this sun at home.

TROTTER

I reckon they will. I remember one morning last spring—we was coming out of the salient. Just when it was getting light in the morning—it was at the time when the Boche was sending over a lot of that gas that smells like pear-drops, you know?

OSBORNE

I know. Phosgene.

TROTTER

That's it. We were scared to hell of it. All of a sudden we smelt that funny sweet smell, and a fellow shouted "Gas!"—and we put on our masks; and then I spotted what it was.

OSBORNE

What was it?

TROTTER

Why, a blinkin' may-tree! All out in bloom, growing beside the path! We did feel a lot of silly poops—putting on gas masks because of a damn may-tree! [*He stretches himself and tries to button his tunic.*] Lord! I *must* get my fat down. [*He gets up.*] Well, I better go

and relieve Stanhope. He'll curse like hell if I don't. I bet he's got a red-hot liver this morning.

OSBORNE

I relieve you at eleven.

TROTTER

That's right. I don't like this time of day in the line. The old Boche 'as just 'ad 'is breakfast, and sends over a few whizz-bangs and rifle grenades to show 'e ain't forgotten us. Still, I'd rather 'ave a bang or two than this damn quiet. [*He puts on his helmet and gas mask satchel and goes up the steps.*] Cheero!

OSBORNE

Cheero!

RALEIGH

Cheero!

OSBORNE

[*To* RALEIGH.] I expect Stanhope'll let you go on duty alone now.

RALEIGH

Will he? About what time?

OSBORNE

Well, after me, I expect. From about two till four.

RALEIGH

I see.

[*There is a pause. Then* OSBORNE *looks at* RALEIGH *and laughs.*]

OSBORNE

What do you think about it all?

RALEIGH

Oh, all right, thanks. [*He laughs.*] I feel I've been here ages.

OSBORNE

[*Filling his pipe.*] I expect you do. The time passes, though.

RALEIGH

Are we here for six days?

OSBORNE

Yes. Seems a long time, doesn't it?

RALEIGH

[*Laughing shortly.*] It does rather. I can't imagine—the end of six days here——

OSBORNE

Anyhow, we've done twelve hours already. It's fine when you are relieved and go down the line to billets, and have a good hot bath, and sit and read under trees.

RALEIGH

Good Lord, I feel I haven't seen a tree for ages—not a real tree with leaves and branches—and yet I've only been here twelve hours.

OSBORNE

How did you feel—in the front line?

RALEIGH

Oh, all right. It seemed so frightfully quiet and uncanny—everybody creeping about and talking in low voices. I suppose you've *got* to talk quietly when you're

so near the German front line—only about seventy yards, isn't it?

OSBORNE

Yes. About the breadth of a football field.

RALEIGH

It's funny to think of it like that.

OSBORNE

I always measure distances like that out here. Keeps them in proportion.

RALEIGH

Did you play football?

OSBORNE

Yes. But mostly reffing at school in the last few years.

RALEIGH

Are you a schoolmaster, then?

OSBORNE

Yes. I must apologise.

RALEIGH

Oh, I don't mind schoolmasters. [*Hastily.*] I—I mean, I never met one outside a school.

OSBORNE

They do get out sometimes.

RALEIGH

[*Laughing.*] Who did you play for?

OSBORNE

The Harlequins.

RALEIGH

I say, really!

OSBORNE

I played for the English team on one great occasion.

RALEIGH

What! For *England*!

OSBORNE

I was awfully lucky to get the chance. It's a long time ago now.

RALEIGH

[*With awe.*] Oh, but, good Lord! that must have been simply topping. Where did you play?

OSBORNE

Wing three.

RALEIGH

I say, I—I never realised—you'd played for England?

OSBORNE

Tuppence to talk to me now! Anyhow, don't breeze it about.

RALEIGH

Don't the others know?

OSBORNE

We never talk about football.

RALEIGH

They ought to know. It'd make them feel jolly bucked.

OSBORNE

[*Laughing.*] It doesn't make much difference out here!

RALEIGH

It must be awfully thrilling, playing in front of a huge crowd—all shouting and cheering——

OSBORNE

You don't notice it when the game begins.

RALEIGH

You're too taken up with the game?

OSBORNE

Yes.

RALEIGH

I used to get wind up playing at school with only a few kids looking on.

OSBORNE

You feel it more when there are only a few. [*He has picked up a slip of paper from the table; suddenly he laughs.*] Look at this!

RALEIGH

[*Looking at it curiously.*] What is it?

OSBORNE

Trotter's plan to make the time pass quickly. One hundred and forty-four little circles—one for each hour of six days. He's blacked in six already. He's six hours behind.

RALEIGH

It's rather a good idea. I like Trotter.

OSBORNE

He's a good chap.

RALEIGH

He makes things feel—natural.

OSBORNE

He's a genuine sort of chap.

RALEIGH

That's it. He's genuine. [*There is a pause. He has been filling a new pipe.* OSBORNE *is puffing at his old one.*] How topping—to have played for England!

OSBORNE

It was rather fun.

[*There is a pause.*]

RALEIGH

The Germans are really quite decent, aren't they? I mean, outside the newspapers?

OSBORNE

Yes. [*Pause.*] I remember up at Wipers we had a man shot when he was out on patrol. Just at dawn. We couldn't get him in that night. He lay out there groaning all day. Next night three of our men crawled out to get him in. It was so near the German trenches that they could have shot our fellows one by one. But, when our men began dragging the wounded man back over the rough ground, a big German officer stood up in their trenches and called out: "Carry him!"—and our fellows stood up and carried the man back, and the German officer fired some lights for them to see by.

RALEIGH

How topping!

OSBORNE

Next day we blew each other's trenches to blazes.

RALEIGH

It all seems rather—*silly*, doesn't it?

OSBORNE

It does, rather.

[*There is silence for a while.*]

RALEIGH

I started a letter when I came off duty last night. How do we send letters?

OSBORNE

The quartermaster-sergeant takes them down after he brings rations up in the evenings.

[STANHOPE *is coming slowly down the steps.* RALEIGH *rises.*]

RALEIGH

I think I'll go and finish it now—if I go on duty soon.

OSBORNE

Come and write it in here. It's more cheery.

RALEIGH

It's all right, thanks; I'm quite comfortable in there. I've rigged up a sort of little table beside my bed.

OSBORNE

Righto.

[RALEIGH *goes into his dug-out.* STANHOPE *is slowly taking off his equipment.*]

STANHOPE

What a foul smell of bacon.

OSBORNE

Yes. We've got bacon for breakfast.

STANHOPE

So I gather. Have you told Raleigh about rifle inspection?

OSBORNE

No.

STANHOPE

[*At the entrance to* RALEIGH'S *dug-out.*] Raleigh!

RALEIGH

[*Appearing.*] Yes?

STANHOPE

You inspect your platoon's rifles at nine o'clock.

RALEIGH

Oh, righto, Stanhope. [*He goes again.*]

STANHOPE

[*Sitting at the table.*] I've arranged two wiring parties to begin at eight o'clock to-night—Corporal Burt with two men and Sergeant Smith with two. I want them to strengthen the wire all along the front.

OSBORNE

It's very weak at present.

STANHOPE

Every company leaves it for the next one to do. There're great holes blown out weeks ago.

OSBORNE

I know.

STANHOPE

Next night we'll start putting a belt of wire down both sides of us.

OSBORNE

Down the sides?

STANHOPE

Yes. We'll wire ourselves right in. If this attack comes, I'm not going to trust the companies on our sides to hold their ground.

[MASON *has come in, and stands diffidently in the background.*]

MASON

Would you like a nice bit o' bacon, sir?

STANHOPE

No, thanks. I'll have a cup of tea.

MASON

Right, sir. [*He goes out.*]

STANHOPE

I've been having a good look round. We've got a strong position here—if we wire ourselves right in. The colonel's been talking to me up there.

OSBORNE

Oh. Has he been round?

STANHOPE

Yes. He says a German prisoner gave the day of attack as the 21st.

OSBORNE

That's Thursday?

STANHOPE

Yes. To-day's Tuesday.

OSBORNE

That means about dawn the day after to-morrow.

STANHOPE

The second dawn from now.

[*There is a pause.*]

OSBORNE

Then it'll come while we're here.

STANHOPE

Yes. It'll come while we're here. And we shall be in the front seats.

OSBORNE

Oh, well——

[*In the silence that follows, Mason enters with a cup of tea.*]

MASON

Would you like a nice plate of sardines, sir?

STANHOPE

I should loathe it.

MASON

Very good, sir. [*He goes out.*]

OSBORNE

Did the colonel have much to say?

STANHOPE

Only that when the attack comes we can't expect any

help from behind. We're not to move from here. We've got to stick it.

OSBORNE

I see.

STANHOPE

We'll wire ourselves in as strongly as possible. I've got to arrange battle positions for each platoon and section this afternoon.

OSBORNE

Well, I'm glad it's coming at last. I'm sick of waiting.

STANHOPE

[*Looking at* TROTTER'S *chart.*] What's this extraordinary affair?

OSBORNE

Trotter's plan to make the time pass by. A hundred and forty-four circles—one for each hour of six days.

STANHOPE

How many hours are there till dawn on the 21st.

OSBORNE

Goodness knows. Not many, I hope.

STANHOPE

Nearly nine o'clock now. Twenty-four till nine tomorrow; twelve till nine at night—that's thirty-six; nine till six next morning; that's forty-five altogether. [*He begins to count off forty-five circles on* TROTTER'S *chart.*]

OSBORNE

What are you going to do?

STANHOPE

At the end of the forty-fifth circle I'm going to draw a picture of Trotter being blown up in four pieces.

OSBORNE

Don't spoil his chart. It took him an hour to make that.

STANHOPE

He won't see the point. He's no imagination.

OSBORNE

I don't suppose he has.

STANHOPE

Funny not to have any imagination. Must be rather nice.

OSBORNE

A bit dull, I should think.

STANHOPE

It must be, rather. I suppose all his life Trotter feels like you and I do when we're drowsily drunk.

OSBORNE

Poor chap!

STANHOPE

I suppose if Trotter looks at that wall he just sees a brown surface. He doesn't see into the earth beyond—the worms wandering about round the stones and roots of trees. I wonder how a worm knows when it's going up or down.

OSBORNE

When it's going down I suppose the blood runs into its head and makes it throb.

STANHOPE

Worms haven't got any blood.

OSBORNE

Then I don't suppose it ever does know.

STANHOPE

Rotten if it didn't—and went on going down when it thought it was coming up.

OSBORNE

Yes, I expect that's the one thing worms dread.

STANHOPE

D'you think this life sharpens the imagination?

OSBORNE

It must.

STANHOPE

Whenever I look at anything nowadays I see right through it. Looking at you now there's your uniform—your jersey—shirt—vest—then beyond that——

OSBORNE

Let's talk about something else—croquet, or the war.

STANHOPE

[*Laughing.*] Sorry! It's a habit that's grown on me lately—to look right through things, and on and on—till I get frightened and stop.

OSBORNE

I suppose everybody out here—*feels* more keenly.

STANHOPE

I hope so. I wondered if there was anything wrong with me. D'you ever get a sudden feeling that every-

thing's going farther and farther away—till you're the only thing in the world—and then the world begins going away—until you're the only thing in—in the universe—and you struggle to get back—and can't?

OSBORNE

Bit of nerve strain, that's all.

STANHOPE

You don't think I'm going potty?

OSBORNE

Oh, Lord, no!

STANHOPE

[*Throwing back his head and laughing.*] Dear old Uncle! you don't really know, do you? You just pretend you do, to make me feel all right.

OSBORNE

When people are going potty they never talk about it; they keep it to themselves.

STANHOPE

Oh, well, that's all right, then. [*There is silence for a while.*] I had that feeling this morning, standing out there in the line while the sun was rising. By the way, did you see the sunrise? Wasn't it gorgeous?

OSBORNE

Splendid—this morning.

STANHOPE

I was looking across at the Boche trenches and right beyond—not a sound or a soul; just an enormous plain, all churned up like a sea that's got muddier and muddier till it's so stiff that it can't move. You could have

heard a pin drop in the quiet; yet you knew thousands of guns were hidden there, all ready cleaned and oiled —millions of bullets lying in pouches—thousands of Germans, waiting and thinking. Then, gradually, that feeling came——

OSBORNE

I never knew the sun could rise in so many ways till I came out here. Green, and pink, and red, and blue, and grey. Extraordinary, isn't it?

STANHOPE

Yes. Hi! Mason!

MASON

[*Outside.*] Yessir!

STANHOPE

Bring some mugs and a bottle of whiskey.

MASON

Yessir.

OSBORNE

[*Smiling.*] So early in the morning?

STANHOPE

Just a spot. It's damn cold in here.

OSBORNE

[*Turning over the pages of a magazine.*] This show at the Hippodrome has been running a long time.

STANHOPE

What? *Zig-zag?*

OSBORNE

Yes. George Robey's in it.

STANHOPE

Harper saw it on leave. Says it's damn good. Robey's pricelessly funny.

[MASON *brings whiskey and mugs and water.*]

OSBORNE

Wish I'd seen a show on leave.

STANHOPE

D'you mean to say you didn't go to any shows?

OSBORNE

[*Laughing.*] No. I spent all the time in the garden, making a rockery. In the evenings I used to sit and smoke and read—and my wife used to knit socks and play the piano a bit. We pretended there wasn't any war at all—till my two youngsters made me help in a tin-soldier battle on the floor.

STANHOPE

Poor old Uncle! You can't get away from it, can you?

OSBORNE

I wish I knew how to fight a battle like those boys of mine. You ought to have seen the way they lured my men under the sofa and mowed them down.

STANHOPE

[*Laughing and helping himself to a drink.*] You going to have one?

OSBORNE

Not now, thanks.

STANHOPE

You go on duty at eleven, don't you?

OSBORNE

Yes. I relieve Trotter.

STANHOPE

Raleigh better go on at one o'clock and stay with you for an hour. Then he can stay on alone till four. Hibbert relieves him at four.

OSBORNE

Righto.

STANHOPE

What's Raleigh doing now?

OSBORNE

Finishing a letter.

STANHOPE

Did you tell him?

OSBORNE

About what?

STANHOPE

Censorship.

OSBORNE

You don't mean that seriously?

STANHOPE

Mean it? Of course I mean it.

OSBORNE

You can't do that.

STANHOPE

Officially I'm supposed to read all your letters. Damn

it all, Uncle! Imagine yourself in my place—a letter going away from here—from that boy——

OSBORNE

He'll say nothing—rotten—about you.

STANHOPE

You think so? [*There is a pause.*] I heard you go on duty last night. After you'd gone, I got up. I was feeling bad. I forgot Raleigh was out there with Trotter. I'd forgotten all about him. I was sleepy. I just knew something beastly had happened. Then he came in with Trotter—and looked at me. After coming in out of the night air, this place must have reeked of candle-grease, and rats—and whiskey. One thing a boy like that can't stand is a smell that isn't fresh. He looked at me as if I'd hit him between the eyes—as if I'd spat on him——

OSBORNE

You imagine things.

STANHOPE

[*Laughing.*] Imagine things! No need to imagine!

OSBORNE

Why can't you treat him like any other youngster?

[RALEIGH *comes in from his dug-out with a letter in his hand. He stops short as he notices the abrupt silence that follows his entry.*]

RALEIGH

I'm sorry.

OSBORNE

It's all right, Raleigh. Going to inspect rifles?

RALEIGH

Yes.

OSBORNE

You needn't bother if the wood's a bit dirty—just the barrels and magazines and all the metal parts.

RALEIGH

Righto.

OSBORNE

See there's plenty of oil on it. And look at the ammunition in the men's pouches.

RALEIGH

Right. [*He crosses towards the door and turns.*] Where do we put the letters to be collected?

OSBORNE

Oh, just on the table.

RALEIGH

Thanks. [*He begins to lick the flap of the envelope.*]

STANHOPE

[*In a quiet voice.*] You leave it open.

RALEIGH

[*Surprised.*] Open?

STANHOPE

Yes. I have to censor all letters.

RALEIGH

[*Stammering.*] Oh, but—I haven't said anything about—where we are——

STANHOPE

It's the rule that letters must be read.

RALEIGH

[*Nervously.*] Oh, I—I didn't realise that. [*He stands embarrassed; then gives a short laugh.*] I—I think—I'll just leave it, then. [*He unbuttons his tunic pocket to put the letter away.*]

[STANHOPE *rises, crosses slowly and faces* RALEIGH.]

STANHOPE

Give me that letter!

RALEIGH

[*Astonished.*] But—Dennis——

STANHOPE

[*Trembling.*] Give me that letter!

RALEIGH

But it's—it's private. I didn't know——

STANHOPE

D'you understand an order? Give me that letter!

RALEIGH

But I tell you—there's nothing—[STANHOPE *clutches* RALEIGH'S *wrist and tears the letter from his hand.*] Dennis—I'm——

STANHOPE

Don't "Dennis" me! Stanhope's my name! You're not at school! Go and inspect your rifles.

[RALEIGH *stands in amazement at the foot of the steps.*]

STANHOPE

[*Shouting.*] D'you understand an order?

[*For a moment* RALEIGH *stares wide-eyed at* STANHOPE, *who is trembling and breathing heavily, then almost in a whisper he says:* "Right," *and goes quietly up the narrow steps.* STANHOPE *turns toward the table.*]

OSBORNE

Good heavens, Stanhope!

STANHOPE

[*Wheeling furiously on* OSBORNE.] Look here, Osborne, *I'm* commanding this company. I ask for advice when I want it!

OSBORNE

Very well.

[STANHOPE *sinks down at the table with the letter in his hand. There is silence for a moment. Then he throws the letter on the table and rests his head between his hands.*].

STANHOPE

Oh, God! I don't want to read the blasted thing!

OSBORNE

You'll let it go then?

STANHOPE

I don't care. [*There is a pause.*]

OSBORNE

Shall I glance through it—for you?

STANHOPE

If you like.

OSBORNE

I don't *want* to.

STANHOPE

You better. I can't.

[OSBORNE *takes the letter from the table and opens it.* STANHOPE *sits with his head in his hand, digging a magazine with a pencil. After a while,* OSBORNE *glances up at* STANHOPE.]

OSBORNE

D'you want to hear?

STANHOPE

I suppose I better know.

OSBORNE

He begins with a description of his getting here—he doesn't mention the names of any places.

STANHOPE

What does he say then?

OSBORNE

The last piece is about you.

STANHOPE

Go on.

OSBORNE

[*Reading.*] He says: "And now I come to the great news. I reported at Battalion Headquarters, and the colonel looked in a little book, and said, 'You report to "C" Company—Captain Stanhope.' Can't you imagine what I felt? I was taken along some trenches and shown

a dug-out. There was an awfully nice officer there—quite old—with grey hair"—[OSBORNE *clears his throat*]—"and then later Dennis came in. He looked tired, but that's because he works so frightfully hard, and because of the responsibility. Then I went on duty in the front line, and a sergeant told me all about Dennis. He said that Dennis is the finest officer in the battalion, and the men simply love him. He hardly ever sleeps in the dug-out; he's always up in the front line with the men, cheering them on with jokes, and making them keen about things, like he did the kids at school. I'm awfully proud to think he's my friend." [*There is silence.* STANHOPE *has not moved while* OSBORNE *has read.*] That's all. [*Pause.*] Shall I stick it down?

[STANHOPE *sits with lowered head. He murmurs something that sounds like* "Yes, please." *He rises heavily and crosses to the shadows by* OSBORNE'S *bed. The sun is shining quite brightly in the trench outside.*]

THE CURTAIN FALLS

ACT TWO

SCENE II

Afternoon on the same day. The sunlight has gone from the dug-out floor, but still shines brightly in the trench.

STANHOPE *is lying on his bed reading by the light of a candle on the table beside him. A burly* FIGURE *comes groping down the steps and stands blinking in the shadows of the dug-out. A huge man, with a heavy black moustache, a fat red face, and massive chin.*

STANHOPE *puts the magazine down, rises and sits up to the table.*

STANHOPE

I want to talk with you, sergeant-major.

S.-M.

[*Standing stolidly by the steps.*] Yes, sir?

STANHOPE

Sit down. Have a whiskey?

S.-M.

[*A suspicion of brightness in his voice.*] Thank you, sir.

[*The* SERGEANT-MAJOR *diffidently takes a small tot.*]

STANHOPE

I say. You won't taste that. Take a proper one.

S.-M.

Well—sir—[STANHOPE *reaches over, helps the* SERGEANT-MAJOR *to a large tot, and takes one himself.*] Turning chilly again, sir. Quite warm this morning.

STANHOPE

Yes.

S.-M.

Well, here's your very good health, sir. [*He raises his glass and drinks.*]

STANHOPE

Cheero. [*He puts down his glass and abruptly changes his tone.*] Now, look here, sergeant-major. We must expect this attack on Thursday morning, at dawn. That's the second dawn from now.

[*The* SERGEANT-MAJOR *takes a very dirty little notebook from his pocket and jots down notes with a very small stub of pencil.*]

S.-M.

Thursday morning. Very good, sir.

STANHOPE

We're to hold these trenches, and no man's to move from here.

S.-M.

Very good, sir.

STANHOPE

It may happen that companies on our sides will give way, leaving our flanks exposed; so I want a screen of wire put down both flanks till it meets the wire in the support line.

S.-M.

[*Writing hurriedly.*] Both flanks—yes, sir.

STANHOPE

When the attack begins, I shall take charge of the left, and Mr. Osborne the right. You will be with Mr. Osborne, and Sergeant Baker with me; 9 and 10 Platoons will move over here. [*He points out the position on the trench map.*] 11 and 12 Platoons to the left.

S.-M.

I see, sir.

STANHOPE

Is there anything you're not clear about?

S.-M.

[*Looking at his notes.*] Seems all clear, sir.

STANHOPE

Anything you want to know?

S.-M.

Well, sir [*clears his throat*]—when the attack comes, of course, we beat 'em off—but what if they keep on attacking?

STANHOPE

Then we keep on beating them off.

S.-M.

Yes, sir. But what I mean is—they're bound to make a big thing of it.

STANHOPE

[*Cheerily.*] Oh, I think they will!

S.-M.

Well, then, sir. If they don't get through the first day, they'll attack the next day and the next——

STANHOPE

They're bound to.

S.-M.

Then oughtn't we to fix up something about, well [*he gropes for the right words*]—er—falling back?

STANHOPE

There's no need to—you see, this company's a lot better than "A" and "B" Companies on either side of us.

S.-M.

Quite, sir.

STANHOPE

Well, then, if anyone breaks, "A" and "B" will break before we do. As long as we stick here when the other companies have given way, we can fire into the Boche as they try and get through the gaps on our sides—we'll make a hell of a mess of them. We might delay the advance a whole day.

S.-M.

[*Diffidently.*] Yes, sir, but what 'appens when the Boche 'as all got round the back of us?

STANHOPE

Then we advance and win the war.

S.-M.

[*Pretending to make a note.*] Win the war. Very good, sir.

STANHOPE

But you understand exactly what I mean, sergeant-major. Our orders are to stick here. If you're told to stick where you are you don't make plans to retire.

S.-M.

Quite, sir.

[OSBORNE'S *voice is calling down the steps.* SERGEANT-MAJOR *rises.*]

OSBORNE

Are you there, Stanhope?

STANHOPE

[*Rising quickly.*] Yes. What's the matter?

OSBORNE

The colonel's up here. Wants to see you——

STANHOPE

Oh, right, I'll come up.

COLONEL

[*From above.*] All right, Stanhope—I'll come down.

S.-M.

[*Who has risen.*] Anything more, sir?

STANHOPE

I don't think so. I'll see you at stand-to this evening.

S.-M.

Very good, sir.

[*He stands back a pace and salutes* STANHOPE *smartly.*

STANHOPE'S *eye falls on the* SERGEANT-MAJOR'S *nearly finished drink on the table. He points to it.*]

STANHOPE

Hoy! What about that?

S.-M.

Thank you, sir. [*He finishes the drink.*]

[*The* COLONEL *comes down the steps.*]

COLONEL

Good morning, sergeant-major.

S.-M.

Good morning, sir.

[*The* SERGEANT-MAJOR *goes up the steps.*]

STANHOPE

Hullo, sir!

COLONEL

Hullo, Stanhope! [*He sniffs.*] Strong smell of bacon.

STANHOPE

Yes, sir. We had some bacon for breakfast.

COLONEL

Hangs about, doesn't it?

STANHOPE

Yes, sir. Clings to the walls.

COLONEL

Lovely day.

STANHOPE

Splendid, sir.

COLONEL

Spring's coming. [*There is a pause.*] I'm glad you're alone. I've got some rather serious news.

STANHOPE

I'm sorry to hear that, sir. Will you have a drink?

COLONEL

Well, thanks—just a spot. [STANHOPE *mixes a drink for the* COLONEL *and himself.*] Here's luck.

STANHOPE

Cheero, sir. [*Bringing forward a box.*] Sit down, sir.

COLONEL

Thanks.

STANHOPE

What's the news, sir?

COLONEL

The brigadier came to see me this morning. [*He pauses.*] It seems almost certain the attack's to come on Thursday morning. They've got information from more than one source—but they don't know where it's going to fall the hardest. The Boche began relieving his front-line troops yesterday. They're bound to put in certain regiments where they intend to make the hardest push——

STANHOPE

Naturally——

COLONEL

And the general wants us to make a raid to find out who's come into the line opposite here.

[*There is a pause.*]

STANHOPE

I see. When?

COLONEL

As soon as possible. He said to-night.

STANHOPE

Oh, but that's absurd!

COLONEL

I told him so. I said the earliest would be to-morrow afternoon. A surprise daylight raid under a smoke screen from the trench-mortar people. I think daylight best. There's not much moon now, and it's vitally important to get hold of a Boche or two.

STANHOPE

Quite.

COLONEL

I suggest sending two officers and ten men. Quite enough for the purpose. Just opposite here there's only seventy yards of No Man's Land. To-night the trench-mortars can blow a hole in the Boche wire and you can cut a hole in yours. Harrison of the trench-mortars is coming in to dinner with me this evening to discuss everything. I'd like you to come too. Eight o'clock suit you?

STANHOPE

Very good, sir.

COLONEL

I'll leave you to select the men.

STANHOPE

You want me to go with them, sir?

COLONEL

Oh, no, Stanhope. I—I can't let you go. No. I want one officer to direct the raid and one to make the dash in and collar some Boche.

STANHOPE

Who do you suggest, sir?

COLONEL

Well, I suggest Osborne, for one. He's a very level-headed chap. He can direct it.

STANHOPE

And who else?

COLONEL

Well, there's Trotter—but he's a bit fat, isn't he? Not much good at dashing in?

STANHOPE

No. D'you suggest Hibbert?

COLONEL

Well, what do *you* think of Hibbert?

STANHOPE

I don't think so.

COLONEL

No.

[*There is a pause.*]

STANHOPE

Why not send a good sergeant, sir?

COLONEL

No. I don't think a sergeant. The men expect officers to lead a raid.

STANHOPE

Yes. There is that.

COLONEL

As a matter of fact, Stanhope, I'm thinking of that youngster I sent up to you last night.

STANHOPE

Raleigh?

COLONEL

Yes. Just the type. Plenty of guts——

STANHOPE

He's awfully new to it all——

COLONEL

All to the good. His nerves are sound.

STANHOPE

It's rotten to send a fellow who's only just arrived.

COLONEL

Well, who else is there? I could send an officer from another company——

STANHOPE

[*Quickly.*] Oh, Lord, no. We'll do it.

COLONEL

Then I suggest Osborne to direct the raid and Raleigh to make the dash—with ten good men. We'll meet Harrison at supper and arrange the smoke bombs—and blow-

ing a hole in the wire. You select the men and talk to Osborne and Raleigh about it in the meantime.

STANHOPE

Very well, sir.

COLONEL

Better send Osborne and Raleigh down to me in the morning to talk things over. Or, better still—I'll come up here first thing to-morrow morning.

STANHOPE

Right, sir.

COLONEL

It's all a damn nuisance; but, after all—it's necessary.

STANHOPE

I suppose it is.

COLONEL

Well, so long, Stanhope. I'll see you at eight o'clock. Do you like fish?

STANHOPE

Fish, sir?

COLONEL

Yes. We've had some fresh fish sent up from railhead for supper to-night.

STANHOPE

Splendid, sir!

COLONEL

Whiting, I think it is.

STANHOPE

Good!

COLONEL

Well, bye-bye. [*The* COLONEL *goes up the steps.*]

[STANHOPE *stands watching for a moment, then turns and walks slowly to the table.* HIBBERT *comes quietly into the dug-out from the tunnel leading from his sleeping quarters.*]

STANHOPE

Hullo! I thought you were asleep.

HIBBERT

I just wanted a word with you, Stanhope.

STANHOPE

Fire away.

HIBBERT

This neuralgia of mine. I'm awfully sorry. I'm afraid I can't stick it any longer——

STANHOPE

I know. It's rotten, isn't it? I've got it like hell——

HIBBERT

[*Taken aback.*] *You* have?

STANHOPE

Had it for weeks.

HIBBERT

Well, I'm sorry, Stanhope. It's no good. I've tried damned hard; but I must go down——

STANHOPE

Go down—where?

HIBBERT

Why, go sick—go down the line. I must go into hospital and have some kind of treatment. [*There is a silence for a moment.* STANHOPE *is looking at* HIBBERT—*till* HIBBERT *turns away and walks towards his dug-out.*] I'll go right along now, I think——

STANHOPE

[*Quietly.*] You're going to stay here.

HIBBERT

I'm going down to see the doctor. He'll send me to hospital when he understands——

STANHOPE

I've seen the doctor. I saw him this morning. He won't send you to hospital, Hibbert; he'll send you back here. He promised me he would. [*There is silence.*] So you can save yourself a walk.

HIBBERT

[*Fiercely.*] What the hell——!

STANHOPE

Stop that!

HIBBERT

I've a perfect right to go sick if I want to. The men can—why can't an officer?

STANHOPE

No man's sent down unless he's very ill. There's nothing wrong with you, Hibbert. The German attack's on Thursday; almost for certain. You're going to stay here and see it through with the rest of us.

HIBBERT

[*Hysterically.*] I tell you, I can't—the pain's nearly sending me mad. I'm going! I've got all my stuff packed. I'm going now—you can't stop me! [*He goes excitedly into the dug-out.* STANHOPE *walks slowly towards the steps, turns, and undoes the flap of his revolver holster. He takes out his revolver, and stands casually examining it.*]

[HIBBERT *returns with his pack slung on his back and a walking-stick in his hand. He pauses at the sight of* STANHOPE *by the steps.*]

HIBBERT

Let's get by, Stanhope.

STANHOPE

You're going to stay here and do your job.

HIBBERT

Haven't I *told* you? I *can't!* Don't you understand? Let—let me get by.

STANHOPE

Now look here, Hibbert. I've got a lot of work to do and no time to waste. Once and for all, you're going to stay here and see it through with the rest of us.

HIBBERT

I shall die of this pain if I don't go!

STANHOPE

Better die of pain than be shot for deserting.

HIBBERT

[*In a low voice.*] What do you mean?

STANHOPE

You know what I mean——

HIBBERT

I've a right to see the doctor!

STANHOPE

Good God! Don't you understand!—he'll send you back here. Dr. Preston's never let a shirker pass him yet —and he's not going to start now—two days before the attack—

HIBBERT

[*Pleadingly.*] Stanhope—if you only *knew* how awful I feel—— Please do let me go by——

[*He walks slowly round behind* STANHOPE. STANHOPE *turns and thrusts him roughly back. With a lightning movement* HIBBERT *raises his stick and strikes blindly at* STANHOPE, *who catches the stick, tears it from* HIBBERT'S *hands, smashes it across his knee, and throws it on the ground.*]

STANHOPE

God!—you little swine. You know what that means —don't you? Striking a superior officer! [*There is silence.* STANHOPE *takes hold of his revolver as it swings from its lanyard.* HIBBERT *stands quivering in front of* STANHOPE.] Never mind, though. I won't have you shot for that——

HIBBERT

Let me go——

STANHOPE

If you went, I'd have you shot—for deserting. It's a hell of a disgrace—to die like that. I'd rather spare you

the disgrace. I give you half a minute to think. You either stay here and try and be a man—or you try to get out of that door—to desert. If you do that, there's going to be an accident. D'you understand? I'm fiddling with my revolver, d'you see?—cleaning it—and it's going off by accident. It often happens out here. It's going off, and it's going to shoot you between the eyes.

HIBBERT

[*In a whisper.*] You daren't——

STANHOPE

You don't deserve to be shot by accident—but I'd save you the disgrace of the other way—I give you half a minute to decide. [*He holds up his wrist to look at his watch.*] Half a minute from now—

[*There is silence; a few seconds go by. Suddenly* HIBBERT *bursts into a high-pitched laugh.*]

HIBBERT

Go on, then, shoot! You won't let me go to hospital. I swear I'll never go into those trenches again. Shoot!—and thank God——

STANHOPE

[*With his eyes on his watch.*] Fifteen more seconds——

HIBBERT

Go on! I'm ready——

STANHOPE

Ten. [*He looks up at* HIBBERT, *who has closed his eyes.*] Five.

[*Again* STANHOPE *looks up. After a moment he quietly drops his revolver into its holster and steps towards* HIBBERT, *who stands with lowered head and eyes tightly screwed up, his arms stretched stiffly by his sides, his hands tightly clutching the edges of his tunic. Gently* STANHOPE *places his hands on* HIBBERT'S *shoulders.* HIBBERT *starts violently and gives a little cry. He opens his eyes and stares vacantly into* STANHOPE'S *face.* STANHOPE *is smiling.*]

STANHOPE

Good man, Hibbert. I liked the way you stuck that.

HIBBERT

[*Hoarsely.*] Why didn't you shoot?

STANHOPE

Stay here, old chap—and see it through——

[HIBBERT *stands trembling, trying to speak. Suddenly he breaks down and cries.* STANHOPE *takes his hands from his shoulders and turns away.*]

HIBBERT

Stanhope! I've tried like hell—I swear I have. Ever since I came out here I've hated and loathed it. Every sound up there makes me all—cold and sick. I'm different to—to the others—you don't understand. It's got worse and worse, and now I can't bear it any longer. I'll never go up those steps again—into the line—with the men looking at me—and knowing—I'd rather die here.

[*He is sitting on* STANHOPE'S *bed, crying without effort to restrain himself.*]

STANHOPE

[*Pouring out a whiskey.*] Try a drop of this, old chap——

HIBBERT

No, thanks.

STANHOPE

Go on. Drink it. [HIBBERT *takes the mug and drinks.* STANHOPE *sits down beside* HIBBERT *and puts an arm round his shoulder.*] I know what you feel, Hibbert. I've known all along——

HIBBERT

How *can* you know?

STANHOPE

Because I feel the same—exactly the same! Every little noise up there makes me feel—just as you feel. Why didn't you tell me instead of talking about neuralgia? We *all* feel like you do sometimes, if you only knew. I hate and loathe it all. Sometimes I feel I could just lie down on this bed and pretend I was paralysed or something—and couldn't move—and just lie there till I died —or was dragged away.

HIBBERT

I can't bear to go up into those awful trenches again.

STANHOPE

When are you due to go on?

HIBBERT

Quite soon. At four.

STANHOPE

Shall we go on together? We know how we both feel now. Shall we see if we can stick it together?

HIBBERT

I can't——

STANHOPE

Supposing I said *I* can't—supposing we *all* say we can't—what would happen then?

HIBBERT

I don't care. What does it matter? It's all so—so beastly—nothing matters——

STANHOPE

Supposing the worst happened—supposing we were knocked right out. Think of all the chaps who've gone already. It can't be very lonely there—with all those fellows. Sometimes I think it's lonelier here. [*He pauses.* HIBBERT *is sitting quietly now, his eyes roving vacantly in front of him.*] Just go and have a quiet rest. Then we'll go out together.

HIBBERT

Do please let me go, Stanhope——

STANHOPE

If you went—and left Osborne and Trotter and Raleigh and all those men up there to do your work—could you ever look a man straight in the face again—in all your life? [*There is silence again.*] You may be wounded. Then you can go home and feel proud—and if you're killed you—you won't have to stand this hell any more. I might have fired just now. If I had you

would have been dead now. But you're still alive—with a straight fighting chance of coming through. Take the chance, old chap, and stand in with Osborne and Trotter and Raleigh. Don't you think it worth standing in with men like that?—when you know they all feel like you do—in their hearts—and just go on sticking it because they know it's—it's the only thing a decent man can do. [*Again there is silence.*] What about it?

HIBBERT

I'll—I'll try——

STANHOPE

Good man!

HIBBERT

You—you won't say anything, Stanhope—about this?

STANHOPE

If you promise not to tell anyone what a blasted funk *I* am.

HIBBERT

[*With a little laugh.*] No.

STANHOPE

Splendid! Now go and have ten minutes' rest and a smoke—then we'll go up together and hold each other's hands—and jump every time a rat squeaks. [HIBBERT *rises and blows his nose.*] We've all got a good fighting chance. *I* mean to come through—don't you?

HIBBERT

Yes. Rather. [*He goes timidly towards his dug-out, and turns at the doorway.*] It's awfully decent of you,

Stanhope—[STANHOPE *is pouring himself out a whiskey.*] And thanks most awfully for——

STANHOPE

That's all right.

[HIBBERT *goes away.* STANHOPE *takes a drink and sits down at the table to write.* MASON *comes in.*]

MASON

Will you have a nice cup of tea, sir?

STANHOPE

Can you guarantee it's nice?

MASON

Well, sir—it's a bit oniony, but that's only because of the saucepan.

STANHOPE

In other words, it's onion soup with tea-leaves in it?

MASON

Not till dinner-time, sir.

STANHOPE

All right, Mason. Bring two cups of onion tea. One for Mr. Hibbert.

MASON

Very good, sir. [*Going towards the door, he meets* OSBORNE *coming in.*] Will you have a nice cup of tea, sir?

OSBORNE

Please, Mason—and plenty of bread and butter and strawberry jam.

MASON

Very good, sir.

STANHOPE

Well, Uncle—how are things going on up there?

OSBORNE

Two lonely rifle grenades came over just now.

STANHOPE

I heard them. Where did they pitch?

OSBORNE

Just over the front line on the left. Otherwise nothing doing.

[*Pause.*]

STANHOPE

The colonel's been talking to me.

OSBORNE

About the attack?

STANHOPE

Partly. We've got to make a raid, Uncle.

OSBORNE

Oh? When?

STANHOPE

To-morrow afternoon. Under a smoke screen. Two officers and ten men.

OSBORNE

Who's going?

STANHOPE

You and Raleigh.

[*Pause.*]

OSBORNE

Oh. [*There is another pause.*] Why Raleigh?

STANHOPE

The colonel picked you to direct and Raleigh to dash in.

OSBORNE

I see.

STANHOPE

The brigade wants to know who's opposite here.

OSBORNE

To-morrow? What time?

STANHOPE

I suggest about five o'clock. A little before dusk——

OSBORNE

I see.

STANHOPE

I'm damn sorry.

OSBORNE

That's all right, old chap.

STANHOPE

I'm dining with the colonel to arrange everything. Then I'll come back and go through it with you.

OSBORNE

Where do we raid from?

STANHOPE

Out of the sap on our left. Straight across.

OSBORNE

Where's the map?

STANHOPE

Here we are. Look. Straight across to this sentry post of the Boche. Sixty yards. To-night we'll lay out a

guiding tape as far as possible. After dark the toch-emmas are going to break the Boche wire and we'll cut a passage in ours.

OSBORNE

Will you fix up the men who are to go?

STANHOPE

Are you keen on any special men?

OSBORNE

Can I take a corporal?

STANHOPE

Sure.

OSBORNE

May I have young Crooks?

STANHOPE

Righto.

OSBORNE

You'll ask for volunteers, I suppose?

STANHOPE

Yes. I'll see the sergeant-major and get him to go round for names. [*He crosses to the doorway as* MASON *comes in with the tea.*]

MASON

Your tea, sir!

STANHOPE

Keep it hot, Mason.

MASON

Will you take this cup, Mr. Osborne?

STANHOPE

Take the other in to Mr. Hibbert, in there.

MASON

Very good, sir. [*He goes in to* HIBBERT'S *dug-out.*]

STANHOPE

Shan't be long, Uncle. [*He goes up the steps.*]

OSBORNE

Righto.

[MASON *returns.*]

MASON

Will you have cut bread and butter—or shall I bring the loaf, sir?

OSBORNE

Cut it, Mason, please.

MASON

Just bringing the jam separately?

OSBORNE

Yes.

MASON

Very good, sir.

[MASON *goes out.* OSBORNE *takes a small leather bound book from his pocket, opens it at a marker, and begins to read.* TROTTER *appears from the sleeping dug-out looking very sleepy.*]

TROTTER

Tea ready?

OSBORNE

Yes.

TROTTER

Why's Hibbert got his tea in there?

OSBORNE

I don't know.

TROTTER

[*Rubbing his eyes.*] Oh, Lord, I do feel frowsy. 'Ad a fine sleep, though.

[MASON *brings more tea and a pot of jam.*]

MASON

Bread just coming, sir. 'Ere's the strawberry jam, sir.

TROTTER

[*Reciting.*]

" 'Tell me, mother, what is that
That looks like strawberry jam?'
'Hush, hush, my dear; 'tis only Pa
Run over by a tram——' "

OSBORNE

The colonel came here while you were asleep.

TROTTER

Oh?

OSBORNE

We've got to make a raid to-morrow afternoon.

TROTTER

Oh, Lord! What—All of us?

OSBORNE

Two officers and ten men.

TROTTER

Who's got to do it?

OSBORNE

Raleigh and I.

TROTTER

Raleigh!

OSBORNE

Yes.

TROTTER

But 'e's only just come!

OSBORNE

Apparently that's the reason.

TROTTER

And you're going too?

OSBORNE

Yes.

TROTTER

Let's 'ear all about it.

OSBORNE

I know nothing yet. Except that it's got to be done.

TROTTER

What a damn nuisance!

OSBORNE

It is, rather.

TROTTER

I reckon the Boche are all ready waiting for it. Did you 'ear about the raid just south of 'ere the other night?

OSBORNE

Nothing much.

TROTTER

The trench-mortars go and knock an 'ole in the Boche wire to let our fellers through—and in the night the Boche went out and tied bits o' red rag on each side of the 'ole!

OSBORNE

Yes. I heard about that.

TROTTER

And even then our fellers 'ad to make the raid. It was murder. Doesn't this tea taste of onions?

OSBORNE

It does a bit.

TROTTER

Pity Mason don't clean 'is pots better. [MASON *brings some bread on a plate.*] This tea tastes of onions.

MASON

I'm sorry, sir. Onions do 'ave such a way of cropping up again.

TROTTER

Yes, but we 'aven't 'ad onions for days!

MASON

I know, sir. That's what makes it so funny.

TROTTER

Well, you better do something about it.

MASON

I'll look into it, sir. [*He goes out.*]

[OSBORNE *and* TROTTER *prepare themselves slices of bread and jam.*]

TROTTER

Joking apart. It's damn ridiculous making a raid when the Boche are expecting it.

OSBORNE

We're not doing it for fun.

TROTTER

I know.

OSBORNE

You might avoid talking to Raleigh about it.

TROTTER

Why? How do you mean?

OSBORNE

There's no need to tell him it's murder——

TROTTER

Oh, Lord! no. [*He pauses.*] I'm sorry 'e's got to go. 'E's a nice young feller——[OSBORNE *turns to his book. There is silence.*] What are you reading?

OSBORNE

[*Wearily.*] Oh, just a book.

TROTTER

What's the title?

OSBORNE

[*Showing him the cover.*] Ever read it?

TROTTER

[*Leaning over and reading the cover.*] *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*—why, that's a kid's book!

OSBORNE

Yes.

TROTTER

You aren't *reading* it?

OSBORNE

Yes.

TROTTER

What—a *kid's* book?

OSBORNE

Haven't you read it?

TROTTER

[*Scornfully.*] No!

OSBORNE

You ought to. [*Reads*]:

"How doth the little crocodile
Improve his shining tail,
And pour the waters of the Nile
On every golden scale?

"How cheerfully he seems to grin
And neatly spread his claws,
And welcomes little fishes in
With gently smiling jaws!"

TROTTER

[*After a moment's thought.*] I don't see no point in that.

OSBORNE

[*Wearily.*] Exactly. That's just the point.

TROTTER

[*Looking curiously at* OSBORNE.] You are a funny chap!

[STANHOPE *returns.*]

STANHOPE

The sergeant-major's getting volunteers.

OSBORNE

Good!

TROTTER

Sorry to 'ear about the raid, skipper.

STANHOPE

[*Shortly.*] So am I. What do you make the time?

TROTTER

Just on four.

[MASON *brings in more tea.*]

STANHOPE

[*Taking the mug of tea.*] Was Hibbert asleep when you came out of there?

TROTTER

No. 'E was just lying on 'is bed, smoking.

STANHOPE

[*Going to the sleeping dug-out.*] Hibbert!

HIBBERT

[*Coming out.*] I'm ready, Stanhope.

STANHOPE

Had some tea?

HIBBERT

Yes, thanks.

TROTTER

I reckon Raleigh'll be glad to be relieved. Rotten being on dooty for the first time alone.

OSBORNE

I don't think he minds.

STANHOPE

I shall be up there some time, Uncle.

OSBORNE

I say, why don't you have a rest—you've been on the go all day.

STANHOPE

There's too much to do. This raid's going to upset the arrangements of the wiring party to-night. Can't have men out there while the toch-emmas are blowing holes in the Boche wire. [*He drinks up his tea.*] Ready, Hibbert? Come on, my lad.

[STANHOPE *and* HIBBERT *leave the dug-out together.* TROTTER *looks after them curiously, and turns to* OSBORNE.]

TROTTER

Can't understand that little feller, can you?

OSBORNE

Who?

TROTTER

Why, 'Ibbert. D'you see, 'is eyes? All red. 'E told me in there 'e'd got 'ay-fever.

OSBORNE

Rotten thing, hay-fever.

TROTTER

If you ask me, 'e's been crying——

[OSBORNE *is writing at the table.*]

OSBORNE

Maybe.

TROTTER

Funny little bloke, isn't 'e?

OSBORNE

Yes. I say—d'you mind? I just want to get a letter off.

TROTTER

Oh, sorry. They 'aven't collected the letters yet, then?

OSBORNE

Not yet.

TROTTER

I'll get one off to my old lady. [*He goes towards his dug-out.*] She's wrote and asked if I've got fleas.

OSBORNE

Have you?

TROTTER

[*Gently rotating his shoulders.*] I wish it *was* fleas.

[TROTTER *goes into his dug-out;* OSBORNE *continues his letter.* RALEIGH *comes down the steps from the trench.*]

RALEIGH

[*Excitedly.*] I say, Stanhope's told me about the raid.

OSBORNE

Has he?

RALEIGH

Just you and me, isn't it—and ten men?

OSBORNE

Yes, to-morrow. Just before dusk. Under a smoke cloud.

RALEIGH

I say—it's most frightfully exciting!

OSBORNE

We shall know more about it after Stanhope sees the colonel to-night.

RALEIGH

Were you and I picked—specially?

OSBORNE

Yes.

RALEIGH

I—say!

THE CURTAIN FALLS

Act Three

ACT THREE

SCENE I

The following day, towards sunset. The earth wall of the trench outside glows with a light that slowly fades with the sinking sun.

STANHOPE *is alone, wandering to and fro across the dug-out. He looks up the steps for a moment, crosses to the table, and glances down at the map. He looks anxiously at his watch, and, going to the servants' dug-out, calls:*

STANHOPE

Mason!

MASON

[*Outside.*] Yessir!

STANHOPE

Are you making the coffee?

MASON

Yessir!

STANHOPE

Make it hot and strong. Ready in five minutes. I'll call when it's wanted.

MASON

Very good, sir.

[*Again* STANHOPE *wanders restlessly to and fro. The* COLONEL *comes down the steps.*]

COLONEL

Everything ready?

STANHOPE

Yes, sir. [*There is silence.*] You've no news, then?

COLONEL

I'm afraid not. It's got to be done.

STANHOPE

[*After a pause.*] I see.

COLONEL

The brigadier says the Boche did the same thing just south of here the other day.

STANHOPE

I know; but didn't you suggest we altered our plans and made a surprise raid farther up the line after dark?

COLONEL

Yes. I suggested that.

STANHOPE

What did he say?

COLONEL

He said the present arrangements have got to stand.

STANHOPE

But surely he must realise——?

COLONEL

[*Impatiently breaking in.*] Look here, Stanhope, I've done all I can, but my report's got to be at headquarters

by seven this evening. If we wait till it's dark we shall be too late.

STANHOPE

Why seven?

COLONEL

They've got some conference to arrange the placing of reserves.

STANHOPE

They can't have it later because of dinner, I suppose.

COLONEL

Lots of raids have taken place along the line to-day. With the attack to-morrow morning, headquarters naturally want all the information they can get as early as possible.

STANHOPE

Meanwhile the Boche are sitting over there with a dozen machine-guns trained on that hole—waiting for our fellows to come.

COLONEL

Well, I can't disobey orders.

STANHOPE

Why didn't the trench-mortars blow a dozen holes in different places—so the Boche wouldn't know which we were going to use?

COLONEL

It took three hours to blow that one. How could they blow a dozen in the time? It's no good worrying about that now. It's too late. Where's Osborne and Raleigh?

STANHOPE

They're up in the sap, having a last look round. What d'you make the time, sir?

COLONEL

Exactly nineteen minutes to.

STANHOPE

I'm thirty seconds behind you.

COLONEL

Funny. We checked this morning.

STANHOPE

Still, it's near enough. We shan't go till the smoke blows across.

COLONEL

The smoke ought to blow across nicely. The wind's just right. I called on the trench-mortars on the way up. Everything's ready. They'll drop the bombs thirty yards to the right.

STANHOPE

Are you going to stay here?

COLONEL

I'll watch from the trench just above, I think. Bring the prisoners straight back here. We'll question them right away.

STANHOPE

Why not take them straight down to your head-quarters?

COLONEL

Well, the Boche are bound to shell pretty heavily. I

don't want the risk of the prisoners being knocked out before we've talked to them.

STANHOPE

All right. I'll have them brought back here.

[*There is a pause. The* COLONEL *sucks hard at his pipe.* STANHOPE *roves restlessly about, smoking a cigarette.*]

COLONEL

It's no good getting depressed. After all, it's only sixty yards. The Boche'll be firing into a blank fog. Osborne's a cool, level-headed chap, and Raleigh's the very man to dash in. You've picked good men to follow them?

STANHOPE

The best. All youngsters. Strong, keen chaps.

COLONEL

Good. [*Another pause.*] You know quite well I'd give anything to cancel the beastly affair.

STANHOPE

I know you would, sir.

COLONEL

Have these red rags on the wire upset the men at all?

STANHOPE

It's hard to tell. They naturally take it as a joke. They say the rags are just what they want to show them the way through the gap.

COLONEL

That's the spirit, Stanhope. [OSBORNE *and* RALEIGH *come down the steps.*] Well, Osborne. Everything ready?

OSBORNE

Yes, I think we're all ready, sir. I make it just a quarter to.

COLONEL

That's right.

OSBORNE

The men are going to stand by at three minutes to.

COLONEL

The smoke bombs drop exactly on the hour. You'll give the word to go when the smoke's thick enough?

OSBORNE

That's right, sir.

STANHOPE

[*At the servants' dug-out.*] Mason!

MASON

Coming, sir!

STANHOPE

Were the men having their rum, Uncle?

OSBORNE

Yes. Just as we left. It gives it a quarter of an hour to soak in.

COLONEL

That's right. Are they cheerful?

OSBORNE

Yes. Quite.

[MASON *brings in two cups of coffee and puts them on table.*]

STANHOPE

Would you like to go up and speak to them, sir?

COLONEL
Well, don't you think they'd rather be left alone?

STANHOPE
I think they would appreciate a word or two.

COLONEL
All right. If you think they would.

OSBORNE
They're all in the centre dug-out, sir.

COLONEL
Right. You coming, Stanhope?

STANHOPE
Yes. I'll come, sir.

[*The* COLONEL *lingers a moment. There is an awkward pause. Then the* COLONEL *clears his throat and speaks.*]

COLONEL
Well, good luck, Osborne. I'm certain you'll put up a good show.

OSBORNE
[*Taking the* COLONEL's *hand.*] Thank you, sir.

COLONEL
And, Raleigh, just go in like blazes. Grab hold of the first Boche you see and bundle him across here. One'll do, but bring more if you see any handy.

RALEIGH
[*Taking the* COLONEL's *offered hand.*] Right, sir.

COLONEL
And, if you succeed, I'll recommend you both for

the M.C. [OSBORNE *and* RALEIGH *murmur their thanks.*] Remember, a great deal may depend on bringing in a German. It may mean the winning of the whole war. You never know. [*Another pause.*] Well, good luck to you both. [*Again* OSBORNE *and* RALEIGH *murmur their thanks. The* COLONEL *and* STANHOPE *go towards the door.*]

COLONEL

[*Over his shoulder.*] Don't forget to empty your pockets of papers and things.

RALEIGH

Oh, no. [*He goes into his dug-out, taking letters and papers from his pockets.*]

[STANHOPE *is about to follow the* COLONEL *up the steps when* OSBORNE *calls him back.*]

OSBORNE

Er—Stanhope—just a moment.

STANHOPE

[*Returning.*] Hullo!

OSBORNE

I say, don't think I'm being morbid, or anything like that, but would you mind taking these?

STANHOPE

Sure. Until you come back, old man.

OSBORNE

It's only just in case—— [*He takes his watch and a letter from his tunic pocket and puts them on the table. Then he pulls off his ring.*] If anything should happen,

would you send these along to my wife? [*He pauses, and gives an awkward little laugh.*]

STANHOPE

[*Putting the articles together on the table.*] You're coming back, old man. Damn it! what on earth should I do without you?

OSBORNE

[*Laughing.*] Goodness knows!

STANHOPE

Must have somebody to tuck me up in bed. [*There is a pause.*] Well, I'll see you up in the sap, before you go. Just have a spot of rum in that coffee.

OSBORNE

Righto.

[STANHOPE *goes to the steps and lingers for a moment.*]

STANHOPE

Cheero!

[*For a second their eyes met; they laugh.* STANHOPE *goes slowly up the steps. There is silence in the dug-out.* OSBORNE *has been filling his pipe, and stands lighting it as* RALEIGH *returns.*]

OSBORNE

Just time for a small pipe.

RALEIGH

Good. I'll have a cigarette, I think. [*He feels in his pocket.*]

OSBORNE

Here you are. [*He offers his case to* RALEIGH.]

RALEIGH

I say, I'm always smoking yours.

OSBORNE

That's all right. [*Pause.*] What about this coffee?

RALEIGH

Sure. [*They sit at the table.*]

OSBORNE

Are you going to have a drop of rum in it?

RALEIGH

Don't you think it might make us a—a bit muzzy?

OSBORNE

I'm just having the coffee as it is.

RALEIGH

I think I will, too.

OSBORNE

We'll have the rum afterwards—to celebrate.

RALEIGH

That's a much better idea.

[*They stir their coffee in silence.* OSBORNE'S *eyes meet* RALEIGH'S. *He smiles.*]

OSBORNE

How d'you feel?

RALEIGH

All right.

OSBORNE

I've got a sort of empty feeling inside.

RALEIGH

That's just what I've got!

OSBORNE

Wind up!

RALEIGH

I keep wanting to yawn.

OSBORNE

That's it. Wind up. I keep wanting to yawn too. It'll pass off directly we start.

RALEIGH

[*Taking a deep breath.*] I wish we could go now.

OSBORNE

[*Looking at his watch on the table.*] We've got eight minutes yet.

RALEIGH

Oh, Lord!

OSBORNE

Let's just have a last look at the map. [*He picks up the map and spreads it out.*] Directly the smoke's thick enough, I'll give the word. You run straight for this point here——

RALEIGH

When I get to the Boche wire I lie down and wait for you.

OSBORNE

Don't forget to throw your bombs.

RALEIGH

[*Patting his pocket.*] No. I've got them here.

OSBORNE

When I shout "Righto!"—in you go with your eight

men. I shall lie on the Boche parapet, and blow my whistle now and then to show you where I am. Pounce on the first Boche you see and bundle him out to me.

RALEIGH

Righto.

OSBORNE

Then we come back like blazes.

RALEIGH

The whole thing'll be over quite quickly?

OSBORNE

I reckon with luck we shall be back in three minutes.

RALEIGH

As quick as that?

OSBORNE

I think so. [*He folds up the map.*] And now let's forget all about it for—[*he looks at his watch*]—for six minutes.

RALEIGH

Oh, Lord, I can't!

OSBORNE

You must.

RALEIGH

How topping if we both get the M.C.!

OSBORNE

Yes. [*Pause.*] Your coffee sweet enough?

RALEIGH

Yes, thanks. It's jolly good coffee. [*Pause.*] I wonder what the Boche are doing over there now?

OSBORNE

I don't know. D'you like coffee better than tea?

RALEIGH

I do for breakfast. [*Pause.*] Do these smoke bombs make much row when they burst?

OSBORNE

Not much. [*Pause.*] Personally, I like cocoa for breakfast.

RALEIGH

[*Laughing.*] I'm sorry!

OSBORNE

Why sorry? Why shouldn't I have cocoa for breakfast?

RALEIGH

I don't mean that. I—mean—I'm sorry to keep talking about the raid. It's so difficult to—to talk about anything else. I was just wondering—will the Boche retaliate in any way after the raid?

OSBORNE

Bound to—a bit.

RALEIGH

Shelling?

OSBORNE

" 'The time has come,' the Walrus said,
'To talk of many things:
Of shoes—and ships—and sealing-wax—
Of cabbages—and kings.' "

RALEIGH

" 'And why the sea is boiling hot—
And whether pigs have wings.' "

OSBORNE

Now we're off! Quick, let's talk about pigs! Black pigs or white pigs?

RALEIGH

Black pigs. In the New Forest you find them, quite wild.

OSBORNE

You know the New Forest?

RALEIGH

Rather! My home's down there. A little place called Allum Green just outside Lyndhurst.

OSBORNE

I know Lyndhurst well.

RALEIGH

It's rather nice down there.

OSBORNE

I like it more than any place I know.

RALEIGH

I think I do, too. Of course, it's different when you've always lived in a place.

OSBORNE

You like it in a different way.

RALEIGH

Yes. Just behind our house there's a stream called

the Highland; it runs for miles—right through the middle of the forest. Dennis and I followed it once as far as we could.

OSBORNE

I used to walk a lot round Lyndhurst.

RALEIGH

I wish we'd known each other then. You could have come with Dennis and me.

OSBORNE

I wish I had. I used to walk alone.

RALEIGH

You must come and stay with us one day.

OSBORNE

I should like to—awfully.

RALEIGH

I can show you places in the forest that nobody knows about except Dennis and me. It gets thicker and darker and cooler, and you stir up all kinds of funny wild animals.

OSBORNE

They say there are ruins, somewhere in the forest, of villages that William the Conqueror pulled down to let the forest grow.

RALEIGH

I know. We often used to look for them, but we haven't found them yet. [*Pause.*] You must come and help look one day.

OSBORNE

I'll find them all right!

RALEIGH

Then you can write to the papers. "Dramatic Discovery of Professor Osborne!"

[OSBORNE *laughs.*]

OSBORNE

I did go exploring once—digging up Roman remains.

RALEIGH

Where was that?

OSBORNE

Near my home in Sussex there's a Roman road called Stane Street; it runs as straight as a line from the coast to London.

RALEIGH

I know it.

OSBORNE

Near where I live the road runs over Bignor Hill, but in recent times a new road's been cut round the foot of the hill, meeting the old road again farther on. The old road over the hill hasn't been used for years and years—and it's all grown over with grass, and bushes and trees grow in the middle of it.

RALEIGH

Can you still see where it runs?

OSBORNE

Quite easily, in places.

RALEIGH

Did you dig a bit of it up, then?

OSBORNE

Yes. We got permission to dig out a section. It was in wonderful condition.

RALEIGH

Did you find anything?

OSBORNE

We found a horseshoe—and a Roman penny.

RALEIGH

[*Laughing.*] Splendid!

OSBORNE

It's awfully fascinating, digging like that.

RALEIGH

It must be. [OSBORNE *glances at his watch.*] Is it time yet?

OSBORNE

Two minutes. Then we must go up. I wish we had a good hot bath waiting for us when we get back.

RALEIGH

So do I. [*Pause.*] We're having something special for dinner, aren't we?

OSBORNE

How did you know? It's supposed to be a secret.

RALEIGH

Mason dropped a hint.

OSBORNE

Well, we've had a fresh chicken sent up from Noyelle Farm.

RALEIGH

I say!

OSBORNE

And a most awful luxury—two bottles of champagne and half a dozen cigars! One each, and one spare one in case one explodes.

RALEIGH

I've never smoked a cigar.

OSBORNE

It's bound to make you sick.

[RALEIGH *notices* OSBORNE'S *ring on the table; he picks it up.*]

RALEIGH

I say, here's your ring.

OSBORNE

Yes. I'm—I'm leaving it here. I don't want the risk of losing it.

RALEIGH

Oh! [*There is silence. He puts the ring slowly down.*]

OSBORNE

[*Rising.*] Well, I think perhaps we ought to get ready.

RALEIGH

Yes. Righto. [*He also rises.*]

OSBORNE

I'm not going to wear a belt—just my revolver, with the lanyard round my neck.

RALEIGH

I see. [*He puts his lanyard round his neck and grips his revolver.*] I feel better with this in my hand, don't you?

OSBORNE

Yes. Something to hold. Loaded all right?

RALEIGH

Yes.

[*They put on their helmets.* OSBORNE *takes his pipe from his mouth and lays it carefully on the table.*]

OSBORNE

I do hate leaving a pipe when it's got a nice glow on the top like that.

RALEIGH

[*With a short laugh.*] What a pity!

[*There is another pause.* OSBORNE *glances at his watch as it lies on the table.*]

OSBORNE

Three minutes to. I think we'd better go.

RALEIGH

Righto.

[*Their eyes meet as* OSBORNE *turns from the table.*]

OSBORNE

I'm glad it's you and I—together, Raleigh.

RALEIGH

[*Eagerly.*] Are you—really?

OSBORNE

Yes.

RALEIGH

So am I—awfully.

OSBORNE

We must put up a good show.

RALEIGH

Yes. Rather!

[*There is a short pause.*]

OSBORNE

Let's go along, shall we?

RALEIGH

Righto. [*They go towards the steps.*]

[MASON *comes to the entrance of his dug-out as they pass.*]

MASON

Good luck, sir.

OSBORNE

Thanks, Mason.

MASON

It's a lovely chicken for dinner, sir.

OSBORNE

[*Slowly going up the steps.*] Splendid!

MASON

Good luck, Mr. Raleigh.

RALEIGH

Thanks.

[OSBORNE *and* RALEIGH *go up together into the pale evening sun.* MASON *tidies the papers on the table; picks up the two coffee mugs, and goes away. There is silence in the trenches above the deserted dug-out. Then, suddenly, there comes the dull "crush" of bursting smoke bombs, followed in a second by the vicious rattle of machine-guns. The red and green glow of German alarm rockets comes faintly through the dug-out door. Then comes the thin whistle and crash of falling shells; first one by itself, then two, almost together. Quicker and quicker they come, till the noise mingles together in confused turmoil. Yet the noise is deadened by the earth walls of the tiny dug-out, and comes quite softly till the whine of one shell rises above the others to a shriek and a crash. A dark funnel of earth leaps up beyond the parapet of the trench outside; earth falls and rattles down the steps, and a black cloud of smoke rises slowly out of sight. Gradually the noise dies away—there is a longer pause between the crash of each bursting shell. The machine-guns stop—rattle again and stop—rattle for the last time—and stop. Voices are calling in the trench outside;* STANHOPE's *voice is heard.*]

STANHOPE

All right, sir. Come down quickly!

COLONEL

How many?

LIBRARY OF ILION T. JONES

STANHOPE

Only one. [*Another shell whines and shrieks and crashes near by. There is silence for a moment, then* STANHOPE *speaks again.*] Hurt, sir?

COLONEL

No. It's all right.

[STANHOPE, *pale and haggard, comes down the steps, followed by the* COLONEL.]

STANHOPE

[*Calling up the steps.*] Bring him down, sergeant-major.

S.-M.

[*Above.*] Coming, sir.

STANHOPE

[*To the* COLONEL.] You won't want me, will you?

COLONEL

Well—er——

STANHOPE

I want to go and see those men.

COLONEL

Oh, all right.

[STANHOPE *goes to the door, making way for the* SERGEANT-MAJOR *to come down, followed by a bare-headed* GERMAN BOY, *in field grey, sobbing bitterly. Behind come two* SOLDIERS *with fixed bayonets.* STANHOPE *goes up the steps. The* SERGEANT-MAJOR *takes the* GERMAN BOY *by the arm and draws him into the centre*

of the dug-out to face the COLONEL, *who has seated himself at the table. The two* SOLDIERS *stand behind.*]

S.-M.

[*Soothingly to the* GERMAN BOY.] All right, sonny, we ain't going to 'urt you.

[*Suddenly the* BOY *falls on his knees and sobs out some words in broken English.*]

GERMAN

Mercy—mister—mercy!

S.-M.

Come on, lad, get up. [*With a huge fist he takes the* BOY *by the collar and draws him to his feet.*]

[*The* BOY *sobs hysterically. The* COLONEL *clears his throat and begins in somewhat poor German.*]

COLONEL

Was ist sein Regiment?

GERMAN

Wurtembergisches.

COLONEL

Was ist der nummer von sein Regiment?

GERMAN

Zwanzig.

COLONEL

[*Making a note.*] Twentieth Wurtembergers. [*He looks up again.*] Wann kommen sie hier?

GERMAN

Gestern abend.

COLONEL

[*Making a note and looking up again.*] Wo kommen sie her?

GERMAN

[*After a moment's thought.*] Mein Geburtsort?

COLONEL

[*Forgetting himself for a moment.*] What's that?

GERMAN

[*In halting English.*] You—wish—to know—where I was—born?

COLONEL

No! What town did you come up to the line from?

GERMAN

[*After a little hesitation.*] I—do not tell you.

COLONEL

Oh, well, that's all right. [*To the* SERGEANT-MAJOR.] Search him.

[*The* SERGEANT-MAJOR'S *big fists grope over the* BOY'S *pockets. He produces a small book.*]

S.-M.

[*Giving it to the* COLONEL.] Looks like 'is pay-book, sir.

COLONEL

[*Looking eagerly into the book.*] Good.

[*The* SERGEANT-MAJOR *has found a pocket-book; the* GERMAN BOY *clutches at it impulsively.*]

S.-M.

'Ere, stop that!

GERMAN

Lass mich! [*He pauses.*] Let—me—please—keep—that.

S.-M.

[*Very embarrassed.*] You let go! [*He wrenches the case away and gives it to the* COLONEL.]

COLONEL

[*Glancing at the papers in the case.*] Look like letters. May be useful. Is that all, sergeant-major?

S.-M.

[*Looking at a few articles in his hands.*] 'Ere's a few oddments, sir—bit o' string, sir; little box o' fruit drops; pocket-knife; bit o' cedar pencil—and a stick o' chocolate, sir.

COLONEL

Let him have those back, except the pocket-knife.

S.-M.

Very good, sir. [*He turns to the* GERMAN BOY *with a smile.*] 'Ere you are, sonny.

[*The* GERMAN BOY *takes back the oddments.*]

COLONEL

All right, sergeant-major. Send him straight back to my headquarters. I'll question him again there.

S.-M.

Very good, sir. [*He turns to the* GERMAN.] Come on, sonny, up you go. [*He points up the steps.*]

[*The* GERMAN BOY, *calm now, bows stiffly to the*

COLONEL *and goes away, followed by the two* SOLDIERS *and the* SERGEANT-MAJOR. *The* COLONEL *is deeply absorbed in the* GERMAN'S *pay-book. He mutters "Splendid!" to himself, then looks at his watch and rises quickly.* STANHOPE *comes slowly down the steps.*]

COLONEL

[*Excitedly.*] Splendid, Stanhope! We've got all we wanted—20th Wurtembergers! His regiment came into the line last night. I must go right away and 'phone the brigadier. He'll be very pleased about it. It's a feather in our cap, Stanhope.

[STANHOPE *has given one look of astonishment at the* COLONEL *and strolled past him. He turns at the table and speaks in a dead voice.*]

STANHOPE

How awfully nice—if the brigadier's pleased.

[*The* COLONEL *stares at* STANHOPE *and suddenly collects himself.*]

COLONEL

Oh—er—what about the raiding-party—are they all safely back.

STANHOPE

Did you expect them to be all safely back, sir?

COLONEL

Oh—er—what—er——

STANHOPE

Four men and Raleigh came safely back, sir.

COLONEL

Oh, I say, I'm sorry! That's—er—six men and—er—Osborne?

STANHOPE

Yes, sir.

COLONEL

I'm very sorry. Poor Osborne!

STANHOPE

Still it'll be awfully nice if the brigadier's pleased.

COLONEL

Don't be silly, Stanhope. Do you know—er—what happened to Osborne?

STANHOPE

A hand grenade—while he was waiting for Raleigh.

COLONEL

I'm very sorry. And the six men?

STANHOPE

Machine-gun bullets, I suppose.

COLONEL

Yes. I was afraid—er——[*His words trail away; he fidgets uneasily as* STANHOPE *looks at him with a pale, expressionless face.* RALEIGH *comes slowly down the steps, walking as though he were asleep; his hands are bleeding. The* COLONEL *turns to the boy with enthusiasm.*] Very well done, Raleigh. Well done, my boy. I'll get you a Military Cross for this! Splendid! [RALEIGH *looks at the* COLONEL *and tries to speak. He raises his hand to his forehead and sways. The* COLONEL

takes him by the arm.] Sit down here, my boy. [RALEIGH *sits on the edge of* OSBORNE'S *bed.*] Have a good rest. Well, I must be off. [*He moves towards the steps, and turns once more to* RALEIGH *as he leaves.*] Very well done. [*With a quick glance at* STANHOPE, *the* COLONEL *goes away.*]

[*There is silence now in the trenches outside; the last shell has whistled over and crashed. Dusk is beginning to fall over the German lines. The glow of Very lights begins to rise and fade against the evening sky.* STANHOPE *is staring dumbly at the table—at* OSBORNE'S *watch and ring. Presently he turns his haggard face towards* RALEIGH, *who sits with lowered head, looking at the palms of his hands.* STANHOPE *moves slowly across towards the doorway, and pauses to look down at* RALEIGH. RALEIGH *looks up into* STANHOPE'S *face, and their eyes meet. When* STANHOPE *speaks, his voice is still expressionless and dead.*]

STANHOPE

Must you sit on Osborne's bed?

[*He turns and goes slowly up the steps.* RALEIGH *rises unsteadily, murmurs "sorry"—and stands with lowered head. Heavy guns are booming miles away.*]

THE CURTAIN FALLS

ACT THREE

SCENE II

Late evening on the same day.

The dug-out is lit quite festively by an unusual number of candles. Two champagne bottles stand prominently on the table. Dinner is over.

STANHOPE, *with a cigar between his teeth, lounges across the table, one elbow among the plates and mugs. His hair is ruffled; there is a bright red flush on his cheeks. He has just made a remark which has sent* HIBBERT *and* TROTTER *into uproarious laughter; he listens with a smile.* TROTTER *is sitting on the box to the right of the table, leaning back against the wall. A cigar is embedded in his podgy fingers; his face is a shiny scarlet, with deep red patches below the ears. The three bottom buttons of his tunic are undone, and now and then his hand steals gently over his distended stomach.* HIBBERT *sits on the bed to the left, his thin white fingers nervously twitching the ash from his cigar. His pale face is shiny with sweat from the heat of the candles; his laugh is high-pitched and excited.* TROTTER *speaks in a husky voice as the laughter dies away.*

TROTTER

And what did she say to that?

STANHOPE

She said, "Not in these trousers"—in French.

[TROTTER *and* HIBBERT *burst into laughter again.*]

TROTTER

[*Coughing and wheezing.*] Oh—dear-o-dear!

STANHOPE

I simply drew myself up and said, "Very well, mam'sel, have it your own way."

TROTTER

And she did?

STANHOPE

No. She didn't.

[*Again the others laugh.* TROTTER *wipes a tear from his eye.*]

TROTTER

Oh, skipper, you *are* a scream—and no mistake!

HIBBERT

I never forget picking up a couple of tarts one night and taking 'em out to dinner.

TROTTER

[*Winking at* STANHOPE.] 'E's orf again.

HIBBERT

We drank enough bubbly to sink a battleship——

STANHOPE

To *float* a battleship.

HIBBERT

Well—to float a battleship. Then I took 'em for a joy-

ride out to Maidenhead—did sixty all the way. We danced a bit at Skindles, and drank a lot of port and muck. Then damned if I didn't lose the way coming back—got landed miles from anywhere. And those tarts began cursing me like hell—said I'd done it on purpose. I said if they didn't damn well shut up I'd chuck 'em both out in the road and leave 'em.

STANHOPE

[*Ironically.*] Hurrah! That's the idea! Treat 'em rough!

HIBBERT

[*Giggling.*] That shut 'em up all right! Then I started doing about sixty down all sorts of roads—I went round a corner on two wheels with those girls' hair on end—didn't have any more trouble from *them!* [*He chuckles at the memory, and takes an unsteady gulp of champagne.*]

STANHOPE

You're the sort of fellow who makes girls hard to please.

TROTTER

[*Heavily.*] Well, I never 'ad no motorcar; my old lady and me used to walk; legs is good enough for me.

STANHOPE

You satisfied with legs?

TROTTER

I am—yes!

STANHOPE

Much cheaper.

HIBBERT

[*Laughing delightedly.*] That's damn good!

STANHOPE

[*Raising his mug.*] Well, here's a toast to legs—God bless 'em!

HIBBERT

[*Raising his mug.*] Good old legs!

TROTTER

[*Raising his mug.*] Shanks's mare.

STANHOPE

Shanks's *what?*

TROTTER

Shanks's mare, they call 'em.

STANHOPE

Call what?

TROTTER

Why—legs.

HIBBERT

[*Almost screaming with delight.*] Oh, Trotter! you're a *dream!*

TROTTER

[*Turning a baleful eye on* HIBBERT.] You've 'ad too much champagne, you 'ave.

[HIBBERT *takes a leather case from his pocket and produces some picture post-cards.*]

HIBBERT

I say, I've never shown you these, have I?

[*He hands them one by one to* STANHOPE, *smiling up into* STANHOPE's *face for approval.*]

STANHOPE

Where did you get these from?

HIBBERT

In Bethune. [*He hands up a card.*] She's all right, isn't she?

STANHOPE

Too fat.

HIBBERT

[*Looking over* STANHOPE'S *shoulder.*] Oh, I don't know.

STANHOPE

Much too fat. [*He hands the card to* TROTTER.] What do you think, Trotter?

[TROTTER *takes a pair of pince-nez from his pocket, balances them on his fat nose, and looks at the picture.*]

HIBBERT

All right, isn't she?

TROTTER

Well, I don't know. If you ask me I'd rather 'ave a decent picture of Margate Pier.

HIBBERT

[*Impatiently.*] Oh, you don't understand *art.* [*He hands another card to* STANHOPE.] There's a nice pair of legs for you.

STANHOPE

Too thin—aren't they, Trotter? [*He hands* TROTTER *the card.*]

TROTTER

[*After some thought.*] Scraggy, I call 'em.

HIBBERT

[*Handing* STANHOPE *another card.*] *That's* the one I like best.

STANHOPE

Not bad.

HIBBERT

Glorious bedroom eyes.

STANHOPE

She's all right.

HIBBERT

Ever seen that show *Zip* at the Hippodrome? Couple of damn fine girls in that—twins. Did you see 'em, skipper?

STANHOPE

[*Wearily.*] I don't know—seen stacks of shows—can't remember them all. [*He brightens up.*] Now then, swallow up that bubbly! Hi! Mason!

MASON

Yessir!

[MASON *appears.*]

STANHOPE

Bring some whiskey.

MASON

Yessir. [*He disappears.*]

TROTTER

What? Whiskey on top of champagne?

STANHOPE

Why not? It's all right.

TROTTER

Well, I don't know; doesn't sound right to me. I feel as if somebody's blown me up with a bicycle pump.

STANHOPE

You look it, too.

TROTTER

[*Blowing a stream of cigar smoke up to the dark ceiling.*] Any'ow, it was a jolly bit o' chicken—and I'd go a mile any day for a chunk o' that jam pudding.

[MASON *brings a bottle of whiskey.*]

STANHOPE

Your pudding's made Mr. Trotter feel all blown out, Mason.

MASON

I'm sorry, sir; it wasn't meant, sir.

TROTTER

It was all right, Mason, take it from me. I know a decent bit o' pudden when I see it.

MASON

It was only boiled ration biscuits and jam, sir. [*He turns to* STANHOPE.] I thought I better tell you, sir—this is the last bottle.

STANHOPE

The last bottle! Why, damn it, we brought six!

MASON

I know, sir. But five's gone.

MASON

Where the devil's it gone to?

MASON

Well, sir, you remember there was one on the first night—and then one——

STANHOPE

Oh, for Lord's sake don't go through them one by one; this'll last till sunrise. [*He turns to* TROTTER *and* HIBBERT.] Sunrise to-morrow, my lads!

TROTTER

Oh, forget that.

STANHOPE

You bet we will! Now then! Who's for a spot of whiskey?

TROTTER

I reckon I'm about full up. I'd like a nice cup o' tea, Mason.

MASON

Very good, sir. [*He goes out.*]

STANHOPE

Tea!

TROTTER

Yes. That's what I want. Decent cup o' tea. Still, I'll just 'ave about a spoonful o' whiskey—got a touch of pulpitations.

STANHOPE

Here you are—say when!

TROTTER

Wo! That's enough!

STANHOPE

You'll have a decent spot, won't you, Hibbert?

HIBBERT

Yes. I'm game!

TROTTER

[*Stifling a hiccup.*] Just a cup o' tea—then I'll go and relieve young Raleigh. Pity 'e didn't come down to supper.

STANHOPE

I told him to. I told him to come down for an hour and let the sergeant-major take over.

TROTTER

I wonder why 'e didn't come.

HIBBERT

That lad's too keen on his "duty." He told me he liked being up there with the men better than down here with us.

STANHOPE

[*Quietly.*] He *said* that?

HIBBERT

Yes. I told him about the chicken and champagne and cigars—and he stared at me and said, "You're not having that, are you?"—just as if he thought we were going to chuck it away!

TROTTER

I reckon that raid shook 'im up more'n we thought.

I like that youngster. 'E's got pluck. Strong lad, too—the way he came back through the smoke after that raid, carrying that Boche under 'is arm like a baby.

HIBBERT

Did you see him afterwards, though? He came into that dug-out and never said a word—didn't seem to know where he was.

TROTTER

Well, 'e's only a lad.

STANHOPE

[*To* HIBBERT.] He actually told you he preferred being up with the men better than down here?

HIBBERT

That's what he said.

TROTTER

Well, I 'ope 'e gets the M.C., that's all; 'e's just the kid I'd like if ever I 'ave a kid—strong and plucky.

STANHOPE

Oh, for God's sake forget that bloody raid! Think I want to talk about it?

TROTTER

[*Surprised.*] No—but, after all——

STANHOPE

Well—shut up!

TROTTER

[*Uneasily.*] All right—all right.

STANHOPE

We were having a jolly decent evening till you started blabbing about the war.

TROTTER

I didn't start it.

STANHOPE

You did.

TROTTER

You began it about——

STANHOPE

Well, for God's sake stop it, then!

TROTTER

All right—all right.

HIBBERT

Did I ever tell you the story about the girl I met in Soho?

STANHOPE

I don't know—I expect you did.

HIBBERT

[*Undismayed.*] It'll amuse you. I'd been to a dance, and I was coming home quite late——

STANHOPE

Yes, and it's late now. You go on duty at eleven. You better go and get some sleep.

HIBBERT

It's all right. I'm as fresh as a daisy.

STANHOPE

You may be. But go to bed.

HIBBERT

What?

STANHOPE

[*Louder.*] I said, "Go to bed!"

HIBBERT

I say, that's a nice end to a jolly evening!

STANHOPE

I'm sorry. I'm tired.

HIBBERT

[*Perkily.*] Well, *you* better go to bed!

[*There is silence.* STANHOPE *looks at* HIBBERT, *who sniggers.*]

STANHOPE

What was that you said?

HIBBERT

I was only joking.

STANHOPE

I asked you what you said.

HIBBERT

I said, "*You* better go to bed."

[STANHOPE'S *flushed face is looking full into* HIBBERT'S. HIBBERT *gives the ghost of a snigger.*]

STANHOPE

Clear out of here!

HIBBERT

[*Rising unsteadily.*] What—what d'you mean?

STANHOPE

Get out of here, for God's sake!

HIBBERT

[*Blustering.*] I say—look here——

STANHOPE

Get out of my sight! [*With a frightened glance at* STANHOPE, HIBBERT *sneaks quietly away into his dug-out. There is silence, and the guns can be heard—deep and ominous.*] Little worm gets on my nerves.

TROTTER

Poor little bloke. Never seen 'im so cheerful before out 'ere.

STANHOPE

Doesn't he nearly drive you mad?

TROTTER

I reckon 'e only wanted to keep cheerful.

STANHOPE

Doesn't his repulsive little mind make you *sick?* [MASON *brings* TROTTER'S *mug of tea and goes away.*] I envy you, Trotter. Nothing upsets you, does it? You're always the same.

TROTTER

Always the same, am I? [*He sighs.*] Little you know——

STANHOPE

You never get sick to death of everything, or so happy you want to sing.

TROTTER

I don't know—I whistle sometimes.

STANHOPE

But you always *feel* the same.

TROTTER

I feel all blown out now. [*There is a pause.* TROTTER *sips his tea and* STANHOPE *takes a whiskey.*] 'Ere's 'Ibbert's post-cards. Funny a bloke carrying pictures like this about. Satisfies 'is lust, I s'pose—poor little feller. [*He rises.*] Well, I'll go and relieve young Raleigh. Pity 'e didn't come down to supper. [*He tries to button his tunic, without success. He buckles his webbing belt over his unbuttoned tunic, puts on his helmet, and slings his respirator over his shoulder.*] Well, cheero!

STANHOPE

You realise you're my second-in-command now, don't you?

TROTTER

Well, you 'adn't said nothing about it, but——

STANHOPE

Well, you are.

TROTTER

Righto, skipper. [*He pauses.*] Thanks. [*He goes towards the door.*] I won't let you down.

STANHOPE

After your duty, have a decent sleep. We must be ready at half-past five.

TROTTER

Righto, skipper. Well, I'll be going up. Give me a chance to cool off up there. It's as 'ot as 'ell in 'ere, with all them damn candles burning.

STANHOPE

I suppose it is. My head's nearly splitting. [*He blows out three of the candles, leaving the dim light of one.*]

TROTTER

[*Half up the steps.*] There's a bit of a mist rising.

STANHOPE

[*Dully.*] Is there? [TROTTER *disappears into the night.* STANHOPE *broods over the table.*] Mason!

MASON

[*Outside.*] Yessir!

STANHOPE

You can bring Mr. Raleigh's dinner.

MASON

Very good, sir.

[MASON *brings a plate of steaming food, gathering up and taking away some of the used crockery. Presently* RALEIGH *comes slowly down the steps. He pauses at the bottom, takes off his helmet, and hesitates.* STANHOPE *is sitting at the table puffing at the remains of his cigar. There is silence except for the rumble of the guns.*]

STANHOPE

I thought I told you to come down to dinner at eight o'clock?

RALEIGH

Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't think you—er——

STANHOPE

Well? You didn't think I—er—what?

RALEIGH

I didn't think you'd—you'd mind—if I didn't.

STANHOPE

I see. And why do you think I asked you—if I didn't mind?

RALEIGH

I'm sorry.

STANHOPE

Well, we've kept your dinner. It's ready for you here.

RALEIGH

Oh, it's awfully good of you to have kept it for me, but—I—I had something to eat up there.

STANHOPE

You—had something to eat up there? What do you mean, exactly?

RALEIGH

They brought the tea round while I was on duty. I had a cup, and some bread and cheese.

STANHOPE

Are you telling me—you've been feeding with the men?

RALEIGH

Well, Sergeant Baker suggested——

STANHOPE

So you take your orders from Sergeant Baker, do you?

RALEIGH

No, but——

STANHOPE

You eat the men's rations when there's barely enough for each man?

RALEIGH

They asked me to share.

STANHOPE

Now, look here. I know you're new to this, but I thought you'd have the common sense to leave the men alone to their meals. Do you think they want an officer prowling round eating their rations, and sucking up to them like that? My officers are here to be respected—not laughed at.

RALEIGH

Why did they ask me—if they didn't mean it?

STANHOPE

Don't you realise they were making a fool of you?

RALEIGH

Why should they?

STANHOPE

So you know more about my men than I do?

[*There is silence.* RALEIGH *is facing* STANHOPE *squarely.*]

RALEIGH

I'm sorry then—if I was wrong.

STANHOPE

Sit down.

RALEIGH

It's all right, thanks.

STANHOPE

[*Suddenly shouting.*] *Sit down!* [RALEIGH *sits on the box to the right of the table.* STANHOPE *speaks quietly again.*] I understand you prefer being up there with the men than down here with us?

RALEIGH

I don't see what you mean.

STANHOPE

What did you tell Hibbert?

RALEIGH

Hibbert? I—I didn't say——

STANHOPE

Don't lie.

RALEIGH

[*Rising.*] I'm not lying! Why should I—lie?

STANHOPE

Then why didn't you come down to supper when I told you to?

RALEIGH

I—I wasn't hungry. I had rather a headache. It's cooler up there.

STANHOPE

You insulted Trotter and Hibbert by not coming. You realise that, I suppose?

RALEIGH

I didn't mean to do anything like that.

STANHOPE

Well, you did. You know now—don't you? [RALEIGH *makes no reply. He is trying to understand why* STANHOPE's *temper has risen to a trembling fury.* STANHOPE *can scarcely control his voice. Loudly.*] I say—you *know* now, don't you?

RALEIGH

Yes. I'm sorry.

STANHOPE

My officers work *together*. I'll have no damn prigs.

RALEIGH

I'll speak to Trotter and Hibbert. I didn't realise——

[STANHOPE *raises his cigar. His hand trembles so violently that he can scarcely take the cigar between his teeth.* RALEIGH *looks at* STANHOPE, *fascinated and horrified.*]

STANHOPE

What are you looking at?

RALEIGH

[*Lowering his head.*] Nothing.

STANHOPE

Anything—*funny* about me?

RALEIGH

No. [*After a moment's silence,* RALEIGH *speaks in a low, halting voice.*] I'm awfully sorry, Dennis, if—if I annoyed you by coming to your company.

STANHOPE

What on *earth* are you talking about? What do you mean?

RALEIGH

You resent my being here.

STANHOPE

Resent you *being* here?

RALEIGH

Ever since I came——

STANHOPE

I don't know what you mean. I resent you being a damn fool, that's all. [*There is a pause.*] Better eat your dinner before it's cold.

RALEIGH

I'm not hungry, thanks.

STANHOPE

Oh, for God's sake, sit down and eat it like a man!

RALEIGH

I can't eat it, thanks.

STANHOPE

[*Shouting.*] Are you going to eat your dinner?

RALEIGH

Oh! Good God! Don't you understand? How *can*

I sit down and eat that—when—[*his voice is nearly breaking*]—when Osborne's lying out there——

[STANHOPE *rises slowly. His eyes are wide and staring; he is fighting for breath, and his words come brokenly.*]

STANHOPE

My God! You bloody little swine! You think I don't care—you think you're the only one that cares!

RALEIGH

And yet you can sit there and drink champagne—and smoke cigars——

STANHOPE

The one man I could trust—my best friend—the one man I could talk to as man to man—who understood everything—and you think I don't care——

RALEIGH

But how can you when——?

STANHOPE

To forget, you little fool—to forget! D'you understand? To forget! You think there's no limit to what a man can bear? [*He turns quickly from* RALEIGH *and goes to the dark corner by* OSBORNE'S *bed. He stands with his face towards the wall, his shoulders heaving as he fights for breath.*]

RALEIGH

I'm awfully sorry, Dennis. I—I didn't understand. [STANHOPE *makes no reply.*] You don't know how—I——

STANHOPE

Go away, please—leave me alone.

RALEIGH

Can't I——

[STANHOPE *turns wildly upon* RALEIGH.]

STANHOPE

Oh, get out! For God's sake, get out!

[RALEIGH *goes away into his dug-out, and* STANHOPE *is alone. The Very lights rise and fall outside, softly breaking the darkness with their glow—sometimes steel-blue, sometimes grey. Through the night there comes the impatient grumble of gunfire that never dies away.*]

THE CURTAIN FALLS

ACT THREE

SCENE III

Towards dawn. The candles are no longer burning. The intense darkness of the dug-out is softened by the glow of the Very lights in the sky beyond the doorway. There is no sound except the distant mutter of the guns.

A man comes from the servants' dug-out; for a moment his head and shoulders stand out black against the glowing sky, then he passes on into the darkness by the table. There comes the rasp of a striking match—a tiny flame—and a candle gleams. MASON *blinks in the light and turns to* STANHOPE'S *bed.* STANHOPE *lies huddled with his blanket drawn tightly round him.*

MASON

[*Softly.*] Sir—— [STANHOPE *does not move;* MASON *shakes him gently by the knee. A little louder.*] Sir——

STANHOPE

Yes? [*There is a pause.*] That you, Mason?

MASON

'Arf-past five, sir.

STANHOPE

Oh, right. [*He raises himself on his elbow.*] I was only half asleep. I keep on waking up. It's so frightfully cold in here.

MASON

It's a cold dug-out, this one, sir. I've made some 'ot tea.

STANHOPE

Good. You might bring me some.

MASON

Right you are, sir.

STANHOPE

And take some to the officers in there—and wake them up.

MASON

Very good, sir.

[MASON *goes to his dug-out.* STANHOPE *rises stiffly from his bed, shudders from the cold, and slowly begins putting his equipment on.* TROTTER *wanders in from his dug-out vigorously lathering his face. He is dressed, except for his collar.*]

TROTTER

Wash and brush-up, tuppence!

STANHOPE

[*Looking up, surprised.*] Hullo! I thought you were asleep.

TROTTER

I 'ad a decent sleep when I come off dooty. What's the time?

STANHOPE

Half-past five. It'll be getting light soon. You better buck up.

TROTTER

All right. *I* shan't be long. Sounds quiet enough out there.

STANHOPE

Yes.

[MASON *brings four mugs of tea.*]

TROTTER

Ah! that's what I want. A decent cup of tea.

MASON

[*Putting a mug on the table for* STANHOPE.] Nice and 'ot, sir. I've cut a packet of sambridge for each gentleman, sir.

STANHOPE

Good.

[MASON *takes the other mugs of tea into the right-hand dug-out.* TROTTER *follows, lathering with gusto.*]

STANHOPE

You might give Hibbert and Raleigh a call.

TROTTER

I woke 'em up, skipper. They're getting their things on.

[MASON *returns.*]

STANHOPE

When you've cleared up your kitchen, you must dress and join your platoon in the line.

MASON

Very good, sir.

STANHOPE

If things are going well at eleven o'clock, come down here and do your best to get some lunch for us. We shall come down in turn as we can.

MASON

Very good, sir.

[STANHOPE *sits at the table and begins to write a short report. The first sign of dawn is beginning to gleam in the dark sky.* STANHOPE *calls "Runner!" as he writes. A* SOLDIER *comes from the servants' dug-out.*]

STANHOPE

[*Folding the note.*] Take this to Battalion Headquarters. There's no reply.

SOLDIER

Yessir.

[*The* SOLDIER *salutes and goes up the steps. A plaintive noise comes from the other dug-out.* TROTTER *is singing "There's a long, long trail a-winding."* STANHOPE *listens for a moment, then rises, takes a few small coins from his pocket, and throws them into* TROTTER'S *dug-out. The singing stops abruptly. After a moment* TROTTER'S *voice comes.*]

TROTTER

Thank you kindly, gov'nor!

[*The* SERGEANT-MAJOR *comes down the steps.*]

STANHOPE

Morning, sergeant-major.

S.-M.

Morning, sir. Wiring parties are just in, sir. Made a decent job of it—right down to the support line.

STANHOPE

Good. Everything quiet?

S.-M.

It's all right opposite 'ere, sir, but the guns are goin' 'ard down south. 'Eavy bombardment. Not sure if it ain't spreading up this way, sir.

STANHOPE

Very likely it is. The officers are coming up in a minute. They'll stand by with their platoons. I must stay here awhile in case of messages. I shall come up directly things begin to happen.

S.-M.

Very good, sir.

STANHOPE

Are the men having their tea?

S.-M.

Yessir.

STANHOPE

Let 'em have a decent drop of rum.

S.-M.

About 'arf again, sir?

STANHOPE

Yes.

S.-M.

If the attack don't come, sir, 'ow long are we to stand-to?

STANHOPE

We must expect the attack any time up till midday. After then I don't think it'll come till to-morrow.

S.-M.

Very good, sir.

STANHOPE

We must naturally make our plans to meet things as they happen.

S.-M.

Quite, sir.

STANHOPE

All right, sergeant-major. I'll see you up there soon.

S.-M.

Yessir. [*He salutes and goes away.*]

[MASON *brings in four little packets of sandwiches, and puts one packet on the table for* STANHOPE.]

MASON

Your sambridges, sir. 'Arf bully beef and 'arf sardine. Sardine on top, sir.

STANHOPE

How delicious. No *pâté de foie gras?*

MASON

No what, sir?

STANHOPE

No *pâté de foie gras?*

MASON

No, sir. The milkman 'asn't been yet.

[MASON *takes the other parcels to the left-hand dug-out.* STANHOPE *pours a little whiskey into his tea and the remainder of the contents of the bottle into his flask.* MASON *returns.*]

STANHOPE

Get dressed as soon as you can.

MASON

Yessir.

[MASON *goes out.* TROTTER *comes in, fully dressed for the line.*]

TROTTER

All ready, skipper. Want me to go up?

STANHOPE

Yes. I think so. Go right round the line and see everything's all right. I'll be up soon.

[*Suddenly there comes the faint whistle and thud of falling shells—a few seconds between each.* STANHOPE *and* TROTTER *listen intently, four shells fall, then silence.*]

TROTTER

'Ullo, 'ullo.

[STANHOPE *strides to the doorway, goes up a few steps, and looks out into the night. He comes slowly back.*]

STANHOPE

Over on Lancer's Alley—somewhere by the reserve line.

[*There comes the louder thud of three more shells.*]

TROTTER

That's nearer.

STANHOPE

Better go up, Trotter. Call the others.

TROTTER

[*At the left-hand dug-out.*] 'Ibbert! Raleigh! come on! [*He lights a cigarette over the candle—lingers a moment, and slowly goes up the steps.*] Cheero, skipper. See you later.

STANHOPE

Send your runner down to tell me how things are going.

TROTTER

Righto.

[TROTTER *disappears into the dark. A vague white line of dawn is broadening above the dark trench wall outside.* STANHOPE *sits at the table and sips his tea. He takes a cigarette and lights it with a quivering hand.* RALEIGH *comes from his dug-out.* STANHOPE *lowers his head and writes in his note-book.*]

RALEIGH

Do you want me to go up?

STANHOPE

[*Without looking up.*] Yes. Trotter's gone.

RALEIGH

Right. [*He goes to the steps and turns shyly.*] Cheero—Stanhope.

STANHOPE

[*Still writing with lowered head.*] Cheero, Raleigh. I shall be coming up soon. [RALEIGH *goes up the steps.* STANHOPE *stops writing, raises his head, and listens. The shells are falling steadily now. He glances towards the left-hand dug-out and calls.*] Hibbert! [*There is no reply. He slowly rises and goes to the left-hand dug-out doorway. He calls again—louder.*] Hibbert!! [*He looks into the doorway and says.*] What are you doing? [HIBBERT *appears. He is very pale; he moves as if half asleep.*] Come along, man!

HIBBERT

You want me to go up now?

STANHOPE

Of course I do. The others have gone.

HIBBERT

Got a drop of water?

STANHOPE

What d'you want water for?

HIBBERT

I'm so frightfully thirsty. All that champagne and stuff—dried my mouth up.

[STANHOPE *pours a drop of water into a mug and gives it to* HIBBERT.]

STANHOPE

Here you are. Didn't you have any tea?

HIBBERT

Yes. It was a bit sweet, though.

[*The shelling is steadily increasing, and now, above the lighter "crush" of the smaller shells, there comes the deep, resounding "boom" of Minenwerfer.* HIBBERT *sips his water very slowly, rinsing his mouth deliberately with each sip.* STANHOPE *is by the doorway, looking up into the trench. He has just turned away as a sonorous drawn-out call comes floating through the dawn:* "Stretcher bear-ers!" STANHOPE *half turns, then faces* HIBBERT.]

STANHOPE

Come on. Buck up.

HIBBERT

There's no appalling hurry, is there?

STANHOPE

No hurry! Why d'you think the others have gone up?

HIBBERT

[*Slowly.*] What? Trotter and Raleigh?

STANHOPE

[*Sharply.*] Wake up, man! What the devil's the matter with you?

[HIBBERT *slowly puts down his mug.*]

HIBBERT

Champagne dries the mouth up so. Makes the tongue feel like a bit of paper.

[*There is a slight pause.*]

STANHOPE

The longer you stay here, the harder it'll be to go up.

HIBBERT

Good Lord! You don't think I'm——

STANHOPE

You're just wasting as much time as you can.

HIBBERT

Well, damn it, it's no good going up till I feel fit. Let's just have another spot of water.

[HIBBERT *takes the jug and pours out a little more water. He is the picture of misery.* STANHOPE *stands impatiently beside him.* MASON *appears from his dug-out, fully dressed for the line, his rifle slung over his shoulder.*]

MASON

I'll go right along, sir. I've made up the fire to last a good three hours—if you don't mind me popping down about nine o'clock to 'ave a look at it.

STANHOPE

All right, Mason. Mr. Hibbert's coming up now. You can go along with him.

MASON

[*To* HIBBERT.] I'd like to come along of you if you don't mind, sir. I ain't bin up in this part of the front line. Don't want to get lorst.

STANHOPE

Mr. Hibbert'll show you the way up. [*He turns to* HIBBERT.] Keep your men against the back wall of

the trench as long as the shells are dropping behind. Cheero! [HIBBERT *looks at* STANHOPE *for a moment, then with a slight smile, he goes slowly up the steps and into the trench,* MASON *following behind. A dark figure stands out against the pale sky; comes hurrying down the steps—a* PRIVATE SOLDIER, *out of breath and excited.*] Yes?

SOLDIER

Message from Mr. Trotter, sir. Shells falling mostly behind support line. Minnies along front line.

STANHOPE

Who's just been hit?

SOLDIER

Corporal Ross, I think it was, sir. Minnie dropped in the trench at the corner—just as I come away.

[*The* SERGEANT-MAJOR *comes down the steps, very much out of breath.*]

STANHOPE

[*To the* SOLDIER.] All right, thanks.

[*The* SOLDIER *salutes, and goes up the steps slower than he came.*]

S.-M.

Beginning to get 'ot, sir.

STANHOPE

Corporal Ross hit?

S.-M.

Yessir.

STANHOPE

Badly?

S.-M.

Pretty badly, sir.

STANHOPE

Most of the shelling's going over, isn't it?

S.-M.

Most of the *shells* is be'ind, sir, but there's Minnies and rifle grenades along the front line. Pretty 'ot it's getting, sir. They're attacking down south—there's rifle fire.

STANHOPE

All right, sergeant-major; thanks.

S.-M.

What I come to ask, sir—what about the wounded—getting 'em down, sir? The shelling's pretty thick over Lancer's Alley.

STANHOPE

What about Fosse Way?

S.-M.

Pretty bad there, too, sir.

STANHOPE

Don't try then. Take anyone badly hit down into the big dug-out on the right. Let the stretcher-bearers do what they can there.

S.-M.

Very good, sir.

STANHOPE

Only Corporal Ross hit?

S.-M.

That's all, sir——

[*Again there comes the drawn-out call—several times as it is passed from man to man:* "Stretcher bear-ers!" *The* SERGEANT-MAJOR'S *eyes meet* STANHOPE'S. *He turns and goes up the steps.* STANHOPE *is alone. Flying fragments of shell whistle and hiss and moan overhead. The sharp "crack" of the rifle grenades, the thud of the shells, and the boom of the Minenwerfer mingle together in a muffled roar.* STANHOPE *takes his belt from the table and buckles it on, puts his revolver lanyard round his neck, and drops his flask and sandwiches into his pocket. The* SERGEANT-MAJOR *reappears and comes hurrying down the steps.*]

STANHOPE

[*Turning quickly.*] What is it, sergeant-major?

S.-M.

Mr. Raleigh, sir——

STANHOPE

What!

S.-M.

Mr. Raleigh's been 'it, sir. Bit of shell's got 'im in the back.

STANHOPE

Badly?

S.-M.

'Fraid it's broke 'is spine, sir; can't move 'is legs.

STANHOPE

Bring him down here.

S.-M.

Down 'ere, sir?

STANHOPE

[*Shouting.*] Yes! Down here—quickly!

[*The* SERGEANT-MAJOR *hurries up the steps. A shell screams and bursts very near. The* SERGEANT-MAJOR *shrinks back and throws his hand across his face, as though a human hand could ward off the hot flying pieces. He stumbles on again into the trench, and hurriedly away.* STANHOPE *is by* OSBORNE'S *bed, fumbling a blanket over it. He takes a trench coat off the wall and rolls it for a pillow. He goes to his own bed, takes up his blanket, and turns as the* SERGEANT-MAJOR *comes carefully down the steps carrying* RALEIGH *like a child in his huge arms.*]

STANHOPE

[*With blanket ready.*] Lay him down there.

S.-M.

'E's fainted, sir. 'E was conscious when I picked 'im up.

[*The* SERGEANT-MAJOR *lays the boy gently on the bed; he draws away his hands, looks furtively at the palms, and wipes the blood on the sides of his trousers.* STANHOPE *covers* RALEIGH *with his blanket, looks intently at the boy, and turns to the* SERGEANT-MAJOR.]

STANHOPE

Have they dressed the wound?

S.-M.

They've just put a pad on it, sir. Can't do no more.

STANHOPE

Go at once and bring two men with a stretcher.

S.-M.

We'll never get 'im down, sir, with them shells falling on Lancer's Alley.

STANHOPE

Did you hear what I said? Go and get two men with a stretcher.

S.-M.

[*After a moment's hesitation.*] Very good, sir.

[*The* SERGEANT-MAJOR *goes slowly away.* STANHOPE *turns to* RALEIGH *once more, then goes to the table, pushes his handkerchief into the water-jug, and brings it, wringing wet, to* RALEIGH'S *bed. He bathes the boy's face. Presently* RALEIGH *gives a little moan, opens his eyes, and turns his head.*]

RALEIGH

Hullo—Dennis——

STANHOPE

Well, Jimmy—[*he smiles*]—you got one quickly.

[*There is silence for a while.* STANHOPE *is sitting on a box beside* RALEIGH. *Presently* RALEIGH *speaks again —in a wondering voice.*]

RALEIGH

Why—how did I get down here?

STANHOPE

Sergeant-major brought you down.

[RALEIGH *speaks again, vaguely, trying to recollect.*]

RALEIGH

Something—hit me in the back—knocked me clean over—sort of—winded me—— I'm all right now. [*He tries to rise.*]

STANHOPE

Steady, old boy. Just lie there quietly for a bit.

RALEIGH

I'll be better if I get up and walk about. It happened once before—I got kicked in just the same place at football; it—it soon wore off. It—it just numbs you a bit. [*There is a pause.*] What's that rumbling noise?

STANHOPE

The guns are making a bit of a row.

RALEIGH

Our guns?

STANHOPE

No. Mostly theirs.

[*Again there is silence in the dug-out. A very faint rose light is beginning to glow in the dawn sky.* RALEIGH *speaks again—uneasily.*]

RALEIGH

I say—Dennis——

STANHOPE

Yes, old boy?

RALEIGH

It—it hasn't gone through, has it? It only just hit me?—and knocked me down?

STANHOPE

It's just gone through a bit, Jimmy.

RALEIGH

I won't have to—go on lying here?

STANHOPE

I'm going to have you taken away.

RALEIGH

Away? Where?

STANHOPE

Down to the dressing-station—then hospital—then home. [*He smiles.*] You've got a Blighty one, Jimmy.

RALEIGH

But I—I can't go home just for—for a knock in the back. [*He stirs restlessly.*] I'm certain I'll be better if —if I get up. [*He tries to raise himself, and gives a sudden cry.*] Oh—God! It does hurt!

STANHOPE

It's bound to hurt, Jimmy.

RALEIGH

What's—on my legs? Something holding them down——

STANHOPE

It's all right, old chap; it's just the shock—numbed them.

[*Again there is a pause. When* RALEIGH *speaks, there is a different note in his voice.*]

RALEIGH

It's awfully decent of you to bother, Dennis. I feel rotten lying here—everybody else—up there.

STANHOPE

It's not your fault, Jimmy.

RALEIGH

So—damn—silly—getting hit. [*Pause.*] Is there—just a drop of water?

STANHOPE

[*Rising quickly.*] Sure. I've got some here. [*He pours some water into the mug and brings it to* RALEIGH. *Cheerfully.*] Got some tea-leaves in it. D'you mind?

RALEIGH

No. That's all right—thanks—— [STANHOPE *holds the mug to* RALEIGH'S *lips, and the boy drinks.*] I say, Dennis, don't you wait—if—if you want to be getting on.

STANHOPE

It's quite all right, Jimmy.

RALEIGH

Can you stay for a bit?

STANHOPE

Of course I can.

RALEIGH

[*Faintly.*] Thanks awfully. [*There is quiet in the dug-out for a long time.* STANHOPE *sits with one hand on* RALEIGH'S *arm, and* RALEIGH *lies very still. Presently he speaks again—hardly above a whisper.*] Dennis——

STANHOPE

Yes, old boy?

RALEIGH

Could we have a light? It's—it's so frightfully dark and cold.

STANHOPE

[*Rising.*] Sure! I'll bring a candle and get another blanket. [STANHOPE *goes to the left-hand dug-out, and* RALEIGH *is alone, very still and quiet, on* OSBORNE'S *bed. The faint rosy glow of the dawn is deepening to an angry red. The grey night sky is dissolving, and the stars begin to go. A tiny sound comes from where* RALEIGH *is lying—something between a sob and a moan.* STANHOPE *comes back with a blanket. He takes a candle from the table and carries it to* RALEIGH'S *bed. He puts it on the box beside* RALEIGH *and speaks cheerfully.*] Is that better, Jimmy? [RALEIGH *makes no sign.*] Jimmy——

[*Still* RALEIGH *is quiet.* STANHOPE *gently takes his hand. There is a long silence.* STANHOPE *lowers*

RALEIGH's *hand to the bed, rises, and takes the candle back to the table. He sits on the bench behind the table with his back to the wall, and stares listlessly across at the boy on* OSBORNE's *bed. The solitary candle-flame throws up the lines on his pale, drawn face, and the dark shadows under his tired eyes. The thudding of the shells rises and falls like an angry sea. A* PRIVATE SOLDIER *comes scrambling down the steps, his round, red face wet with perspiration, his chest heaving for breath.*]

SOLDIER

Message from Mr. Trotter, sir—will you come at once. [STANHOPE *gazes round at the* SOLDIER—*and makes no other sign.*] Mr. Trotter, sir—says will you come at once!

[STANHOPE *rises stiffly and takes his helmet from the table.*]

STANHOPE

All right, Broughton, I'm coming.

[*The* SOLDIER *turns and goes away.* STANHOPE *pauses for a moment by* OSBORNE's *bed and lightly runs his fingers over* RALEIGH's *tousled hair. He goes stiffly up the steps, his tall figure black against the dawn sky. The shelling has risen to a great fury. The solitary candle burns with a steady flame, and* RALEIGH *lies in the shadows. The whine of a shell rises to a shriek and bursts on the dug-out roof. The shock stabs out the candle-flame; the timber props of the door cave slowly in, sand-bags fall and block the passage to the open air. There is*

darkness in the dug-out. Here and there the red dawn glows through the jagged holes of the broken doorway. Very faintly there comes the dull rattle of machine-guns and the fevered spatter of rifle fire.]

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